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Thomas F. Torrance



~~44.9.23.~~

REASONS

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FOR

SEPARATING

FROM THE

Church of Scotland,

IN

A SERIES OF LETTERS,

BY

WILLIAM INNES,

MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL, DUNDEE.

CHIEFLY ADDRESSED TO HIS CHRISTIAN FRIENDS IN THAT
ESTABLISHMENT.

Prove all things: hold fast that which is good: abstain
from all appearance of evil.....I THES. V. 21.

Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the
truth?.....GAL. IV. 16.

Dundee;

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LETTER I.

CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

NOT long after I relinquished my connexion with the established church of Scotland, I was frequently asked, by many of my friends, why I had not publicly given my reasons for the line of conduct I had seen it my duty to pursue. At that period, however, a variety of engagements so much occupied my attention, that I had but little leisure to devote to any publication of this kind. Besides, I knew that it was not ignorance of the principles on which I had acted, that induced several, at least, of my friends to disapprove of the step I had taken. I had discussed these principles with them in conversation again and again. With some they had been the subject of epistolary correspondence. In short, as I had very powerful inducements to continue in my connexion with the establishment, I omitted no opportunity of availing myself of the superior information of my brethren, for removing difficulties, which I sincerely wished removed, but which, the longer I inquired, I found the more closely attached to such a situation.

In the progress of inquiry, however, into the arrangements of the church of Christ, by which this age is certainly much distinguished, the grounds of se-

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paration, not only from the establishment, but also from some of the more numerous classes of dissenters in this country, are becoming every day more interesting.

Those who have no object in view but the discovery and diffusion of truth, can surely have no objections to the discussion of such a subject, if it be conducted with a Christian spirit, and with a steady appeal to the unerring oracles of truth. I know well indeed, it is a topic on which, at first sight, a writer has unavoidably to encounter a good deal of prejudice. The very title page of such a publication will, by some, be considered as almost bordering on a personal attack. Others, after looking at it, will remark, —I see this is on the old stale topic of church-government, which has been so often introduced, and is long since quite exhausted. I judge, brethren, from experience. Our habits of thinking are certainly much influenced by our situations. I recollect well the time, (and I believe I here speak the experience of many,) when I felt it extremely unpleasant to hear such a subject introduced. I considered it as only calculated to lead away one's attention from others of superior importance; and though I secretly felt difficulties, from my connexion with the establishment, the general consideration of my occupying a sphere of extensive usefulness, if it did not remove them altogether, helped me, for the time at least, to banish them from my thoughts. Temperate discussion, however, generally tends in the issue to the diffusion of right principles; and we must surely allow, that whatever may contribute to this, however much it may affect our personal feelings and prejudices, deserves our serious regard. A professing Christian should even blush in secret,

if he could for a moment indulge the wish, that truth on any subject should not be brought to light, with whatever severity and in whatever direction its dictates may fall.

Though I have little hope of either adding to the information, or altering the opinion of such of my professional friends in the established church, as have examined the subject considered in these letters; yet I have the fullest reason to believe there are not a few private Christians, perhaps I may add and some ministers too, who, though extremely intelligent in other respects, are but very imperfectly acquainted with it. I have frequently had occasion to observe this. Indeed, after having for a considerable time abandoned the idea of any publication of this nature, the present one owes its birth to some conversations I lately had with different Christian friends, who, though possessing extensive information on other points, shewed that the grounds of separation from the established church was a subject in a great measure new to them. To such a class of readers, then, I hope it may be of some service, if I shall merely extend a little their information, by putting them in possession of some of the leading arguments, on a topic certainly of some importance, though no other effect should result from it.

But I am induced to engage in this service from another consideration. Though I should completely fail, (as I fear will in most instances be the case,) in my attempt to persuade my friends of the propriety of the step I have taken, if they grant but that there is a considerable appearance of solidity in the principles on which I have acted, it may tend to diminish any prejudices they have imbibed. Dr. Samuel John-

son thus describes the character of a clergyman accustomed to inquiry. "By a solicitous examination of objections, and a judicious comparison of opposite arguments, he attained, what inquiry never gives, but to industry and perspicuity, a firm and unshaken settlement of conviction. But his firmness was without asperity; for knowing with how much difficulty truth is found, he did not wonder that many missed it." While it becomes all to consider with what degree of seriousness and impartiality their inquiries are conducted, it is plain that the ultimate result of them in the mind of any individual must appear truth to him. But if my friend differ from me, though on the whole I should think him wrong, he has a claim on my forbearance, in proportion to the apparent strength of the arguments by which his system is supported.

It is time, however, to come more immediately to our subject. I shall only farther premise two things. *First*, that in such a discussion, the scriptures of truth are the only standard to which we conceive an appeal ought to be made. *Secondly*, that, in these letters, I do not profess to enter into an abstract discussion respecting the expediency of national establishments of religion, but simply to state the reasons I had, and which I think are founded on scriptural principles, for separating from the communion of the established church of Scotland. Here it may be remarked, that nothing is more common in discussing the general question with regard to the lawfulness or expediency of religious establishments, than to leave out of sight those that are known to exist, and to suppose ideal ones, where the reasoner is at liberty to introduce excellencies that were never found but in his imagina-

tion, and to exclude defects, which from the present state of human nature, are quite unavoidable, wherever there is such a union between the church and the world. This reasoning, however, is very fallacious. In examining this point, it would be much better to confine ourselves to such religious establishments as are already in being. It will be time enough to decide upon the merits of these imaginary ones, that are often brought forward in argument, when it appears, from the history of the world, that their existence is compatible with the present state of man. Before concluding this introductory letter, it may be proper to notice the place which the external arrangements of the church of Christ ought to hold in the scale of our inquiries.

Here, as in many other cases, it is much to be regretted men have run into two opposite extremes. Some, you find, disposed to treat every inquiry respecting the subject of church-government with the most marked contempt. The smallest attention to it, particularly if it appear in calling in question some principles which have long been taken for granted, they consider as almost an infallible mark of one possessed of a captious and discontented mind. They are apt to look on such with the eye of jealousy or aversion. They almost immediately infer, that an inquiry into such a subject implies the neglect of those that are more deeply interesting; and they can hardly conceive that a disposition to examine the testimony of scripture, on a point, so little, as they think, connected with practice, can be associated with the simplicity of the gospel, and the genuine influence of vital godliness. On the other hand, it is certainly much to be lamented, that a handle has been too often given to those who

view the matter in this light, by the unsuitable place which many have allowed their particular sentiments respecting the external order of a church of Christ to occupy. They have fallen just into the opposite extreme. With them a particular mode of church-government is every thing. They seem hardly to admit, though they have the most unexceptionable evidence to the contrary, that an eminent degree of practical godliness is at all compatible with what appears to them incorrect notions on this head ; and is there not sometimes reason to suspect, that they allow what they conceive to be proper principles here to make up for the want of spiritual religion? They seem to forget that the external arrangements of the church of Christ are only means to the attainment of a certain end ; that the grand practical design of the gospel is the restoration of the divine image on the heart of man ; that any means it employs are unavailing, in so far as this object is not steadily kept in view ; and that their only value is derived from their tendency to attain it.

I trust, my Christian brethren, you will see the necessity of guarding against each of these extremes, and not allowing the errors even of good men to seduce you from the path of calm and impartial inquiry. The first question, then, which it will here present is, Hath the Lord Jesus, the great Head of the church, been pleased to reveal any thing respecting this subject? If he hath, the guilt of treating it with neglect is already established. There cannot a question exist on our obligations to attend to it, and to receive with implicit faith whatever he hath revealed, so far as we can discover it. I believe it may be safely assumed as a general principle, that where-

ever the mind feels itself indisposed to examine the testimony of scripture on any subject, it will be found to be secretly owing to some latent prejudice against what may be the issue of such an inquiry ; some suspicion that it may lead to consequences which we are not prepared practically to follow out. It is true, we find very different opinions respecting what the scriptures really contain with regard to church-government ; and I believe it will be generally admitted, that individuals, eminent for personal religion, are to be found among Christians of almost every denomination. This last circumstance has not a little contributed to make many undervalue the importance of any particular principles upon this subject. It is, however, a very improper use of the fact. It is a most unsuitable return to the great Head of the church for those manifestations of his grace, by which he is pleased to counteract the evil tendency of remaining error in the minds of his own people. Many instances may be found of Christians, from remaining ignorance, occupying situations in civil life extremely unfavourable to their spiritual interests. It would, however, be very unwarrantable to argue from the Lord's goodness, in preserving such persons unhurt amidst surrounding dangers, that we might deliberately enter into a situation of obvious temptation. Surely every manifestation of that goodness should rather inspire increasing zeal for his glory, and for the most enlarged discoveries of every part of his revealed will. Besides, there can be no real argument from this quarter, for undervaluing the importance of our inquiries respecting the institutions of the church of Christ. There must be a right and a wrong here, as well as every where else. Some systems must be nearer than

others, to the standard revealed in the scriptures, or (if the existence of this be called in question) to the general principles which they contain. We are not to inquire into the reasons why the Lord Jesus hath been pleased to impart peculiarly liberal communications of his grace to those who have adopted principles, on some points, confessedly erroneous. We ought to distinguish, however, between the piety of the individual, and the general tendency of the system under which he acts; and rejoicing in the one, is perfectly compatible with the most decided disapprobation of the other.

Few, I suppose, will deny, that even in the history of the church of Rome, some shining examples of personal religion may be met with. It would be false reasoning, however, to argue from these against the pernicious tendency of the system they contribute to support. That many, singularly devoted to God, are to be found within the pale of the church of England, must be universally allowed. But will it from this follow, that the form and services of that church are founded on the word of God; or, for example, that it is not deeply sinful, that men living in open wickedness should be allowed to come forward, and solemnly declare that they believe they are moved by the Holy Ghost to engage in the sacred work of the ministry?*

* In that part of the service of the church of England, entitled the ordering of deacons, the following questions are proposed by the bishop, and the following answers given by every one vested with that office.

The Bishop. Do you trust that you are inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to take upon you this office and ministration, to serve God for the promoting of his glory, and the edifying of his people?—*Answer.* I trust so.

The Bishop. Do you think that you are truly called, according to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the

It is not then the character of individuals, but the general aspect and tendency of any particular system by which our opinion of it ought to be regulated. If it be founded on scriptural principles, ungodly men being professedly attached to it will not make it worse; and if not, the most eminent examples of holiness among its professed votaries will not be able to sanction it.

due order of this realm, to the ministry of the church?—
Answer. I think so.

The Bishop. Will you apply all your diligence to frame and fashion your own lives, and the lives of your families, according to the doctrine of Christ; and to make both yourselves and them, as much as in you lieth, wholesome examples of the flock of Christ?—*Answer.* I will do so, the Lord being my helper.

After some other questions, the bishop laying his hands severally on the heads of every one of those to be ordered deacons, says,—Take thou authority to execute the office of a deacon in the church of God committed unto thee: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

With this solemn service we may contrast the following anecdotes, taken from a posthumous work of a late clergyman of the English church, some time before his death, though he had determined to relinquish his connexion with it.

“My Lord S.— has got a mistress of whom he is grown weary. On condition the rev. A. B. will marry her, and make her an honest woman, he shall be rector of such a living, in the gift of his Lordship.”

“Mr. G.— has a son who is neither fit for law, physic, nor the army. He has such a living in his patronage. This rip of a son shall be trained to the church, and be the incumbent of the family rectory.”

“A certain rectory, not fifty miles from this place, is said to be of the value of near 2000l. a year. A kind young lady, whose friends have sufficient interest with the patron, falls in love with a wicked, swearing, dashing officer in the army, and marries him. That a comfortable maintenance may be secured for the happy pair, it is agreed that the gentleman shall change the colour of his clothes, apply himself to the attainment of a smattering of Latin and Greek, and admit himself

I shall conclude this letter with the following general position, in which I think every unprejudiced reader will be disposed to coincide with me: "THAT, (other things being equal,) THAT CHURCH IS MOST LIKELY TO PROSPER, WHICH, IN THE FORM OF ITS GOVERNMENT, COMES NEAREST THE MODEL, OR IS MOST AGREEABLE TO THE PRINCIPLES WHICH CHRIST, EITHER DURING HIS PERSONAL MINISTRY, OR AFTERWARDS THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF HIS APOSTLES, HATH MADE KNOWN TO US IN HIS WORD."

I am, &c.

"a member of one of our famous universities. There he actually now is, qualifying himself to take possession of this bouncing benefice. The incumbent being dead, a pliable parson is put in for a time as a *locum tenens*. And when the *quondam* officer has obtained his proper credentials, this worthy *Levite* must resign all his fat pigs in favour of this son of Mars. The white-washed officer will then come forward; and declare in the face of God and man, with a lie in his mouth, that *he trusts he is moved by the Holy Ghost to preach the gospel.*"

SIMPSON'S PLEA FOR RELIGION, p. 152—159.

Some may perhaps think that these anecdotes are told in a manner rather too facetious for so serious a subject. But admitting the existence of such facts as they contain (and this few will question), they discover, when taken in connexion with the ordination service, a degree of profanity that can hardly be equalled.

LETTER II.

CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

THERE seem to be two general opinions in the Christian world respecting the subject of church-government. The *First* is, that no model whatever is laid down in scripture that certain ultimate objects are there mentioned, viz. the conversion of sinners, and the edification of the people of God, which must invariably be kept in view ; but that it is entirely left to Christians to judge, according to circumstances, of the means by which these ends are most likely to be attained. It is, *Secondly*, maintained, that certain regulations upon this point may be clearly discovered in the New Testament, founded either on apostolic precept or example ; that these contain all that is necessary to be directly specified ; and that if any case occur to which they do not immediately apply, the general principles of the gospel are sufficient to guide our decision.

Before attempting a little to appreciate the respective claims which these two different systems have to our regard, it may be proper to observe, that much unreasonable and unchristian abuse has been occasioned by the different opinions men have held on this subject. Some have, in the first instance, adopted

particular sentiments respecting that precise degree of revelation on this head, which is necessary for the welfare of the church of Christ; and they have accused others of impeaching either the wisdom or the goodness of the great Head of it, if they could not see that that precise degree was actually communicated. Now this charge is certainly unreasonable. It is begging the question; because our idea of what is necessary must be regulated by the fact of what is really revealed. Had the Lord Jesus been pleased to leave the external regulations of his church to human discretion, we should have had no title to complain. The simple question with us ought to be, Has he done so? All, I suppose, who profess to derive their opinions from the word of God, associate with their system the notion of the most perfect wisdom and goodness in the divine author of it. It seems but fair, then, to acknowledge, that either of the above opinions may be adopted, without any other impeachment of these attributes, than what is found in a partial ignorance of any other department of revealed truth.

The first of the opinions above stated, is held by a great many who are members of established churches.* For them it is peculiarly convenient, as,

* Of the justness of this remark, the following quotations, from two of the latest writers in defence of the two established churches of this kingdom, may serve as a confirmation. Though the systems these authors support are extremely different, and though there is a particularly marked opposition in the articles they have respectively subscribed on the subject of church-government, when they come to explain their sentiments on that point, there is a striking similarity between them.

“ Though I flatter myself I have proved Episcopacy to
 “ be an apostolical institution; yet I readily acknowledge,
 “ that there is no precept in the New Testament which
 “ commands that every church should be governed by

If it be just, it implies that amidst all that diversity that obtains among such institutions, each of them may be equally conformable to the revealed will of God. It allows men to act according to existing cir-

“bishops. No church can exist without some form of government. But though there must be rules and orders for the proper discharge of the offices of public worship; though there must be fixed regulations concerning the appointment of members; and though a subordination among them is expedient in the highest degree; yet it does not follow that all these things must be precisely the same in every Christian country. They may vary with the other varying circumstances of human society; with the extent of a country, with the manners of its inhabitants, the nature of its civil government, and many other peculiarities which might be specified. As it has not pleased our almighty Father to prescribe any particular form of civil government for the security of temporal comforts to his rational creatures; so neither has he prescribed any particular form of ecclesiastical polity as absolutely necessary to the attainment of eternal happiness. The scriptures do not prescribe any definite form of church-government.”—BISHOP PRETTYMAN’S ELEMENTS OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, vol. ii. p. 383, 396—398.

“Presbyterians,” says Dr. Hill of St. Andrews, “may now rest in a system more liberal than that which was held by their predecessors in the seventeenth century.” After mentioning Hooker as the first who explained the principle on which this system proceeds, and Bishop Stillingfleet as having afterwards more fully demonstrated it, the following account of it is subjoined. “Although church-government is of divine appointment; that is, although the powers which it implies were not created by the state, but are conveyed from the Lord Jesus through those whom he ordained; yet the New Testament does not prescribe any one particular form of church-government in such a manner as to render another form unlawful. By comparing incidental passages in the history of the journeyings of the apostle Paul, with the information which may be collected from his epistles, we may form a conception of the plan of government which he established in some churches. But the book of Acts does not enable us to follow the apostle through the whole of his progress; and of what was done by the other apostles, who, in the execution

cumstances ; to lay aside one regulation, and to introduce another in its room, just as convenience, or the situation of the times may suggest. Indeed, it seems to be founded on a supposition, at least very nearly

“ of their universal commission, visited different quarters
 “ of the world, scripture gives little information, and ancient writers speak very generally and uncertainly. Our
 “ knowledge upon this subject, therefore, only extends to
 “ the practice of one apostle. But we draw a conclusion
 “ which the premises do by no means warrant, when we
 “ infer, that what was done by one apostle in planting
 “ some churches, was done by all the apostles in planting
 “ all churches. The presumption is, that instead of following one uniform course, they would in every city
 “ accommodate their establishments to the edification of
 “ the Christian converts, and the future increase of believers, to the numbers whom they had added to the
 “ church, to the population of the city, and to the qualifications for the different offices which those whom they
 “ found there appeared to possess ; that they would leave
 “ many things to be settled as the future occasions of the
 “ church might require.”

Again. “ The apostles who were sent to gather converts
 “ out of all countries, could not adopt any form of ecclesiastical polity that was equally applicable to the infant
 “ churches which were then planted, and to the national
 “ churches which were afterwards to be established ; and
 “ any attempt to bind upon Christians a particular form
 “ of church-government, must have proved an obstacle to
 “ the propagation of Christianity amongst all the nations
 “ who found that plan incompatible with their civil institution. The gospel, therefore, preserves upon this subject the same just and delicate attention to the nature
 “ of a reasonable being, and the varying circumstances of
 “ the human race, which pervades the whole system. Instead of creating, by the divine institution of any form
 “ of church-government, a pretext for sedition or disaffection to civil rulers, it inspires such sentiments, and
 “ delivers such general precepts, as may, in all different
 “ situations, furnish the most perfect directory for the
 “ government of the church ; and it leaves every nation
 “ which embraces the gospel, to proceed under the influence of the true spirit of that religion, in accommodating their form of church-government to their political constitution ; so that the two moulded together by
 “ human wisdom, may conspire in preserving the public

allied to that of a religion connected with the state: I mean, that the professors of it, as such, may be placed in so great a variety of circumstances, that no simple code of laws would suit them. Now, whence is this but from such a connexion? Suppose no such connexion to exist, and this variety is destroyed. You have then Christians in one of two situations, either in the enjoyment of external peace,

“ tranquillity, and promoting the spiritual and temporal good of those who live under them.”

HILL'S THEOL. INSTITUTES, p. 181, 183.

I most cordially agree with this author in maintaining that the gospel creates, indeed, no pretext for sedition, or disaffection to civil rulers. But, who would for a moment suppose it does this, though it be asserted that it establishes a particular form of church-government? Is there any thing either in Episcopacy, Presbytery, or Independency, inconsistent with the express precept of scripture, that Christians shall be obedient to the powers that be, not only for wrath but for conscience sake? Surely not. It is only when the church and state are united, that any such pretext can be imagined to be derived from the particular form of church-government that is adopted. In the above quotation, it is plainly taken for granted, that the apostles, in their supposed merely general regulations, had an eye to the national churches afterwards to be established, as well as the infant churches they were at the time planting. It might have been useful here to have noticed what sort of national churches these were, as for many centuries those of the Roman Catholic persuasion, from which we have all thought it our duty to separate, were the only ones to which their regulations could refer. The truth seems to be, it must first be ascertained that the apostles intended there should be a union between the church and the world, before we are entitled to look into the regulations they have left respecting church-government, for any thing that will suit such an arrangement. If it be fairly acknowledged that no such simple code of laws as we have in the scriptures will do this, it will be considered by some as a presumptive argument that no such state of things was intended by the lawgiver. In the scriptures we have a key; and if we can discover the lock, the wards of which correspond with it, we shall conclude that this, and this only, was intended by the artificer.

protected by the government of the country in which they live, or in a state of persecution. If the situations in which they may be placed be thus limited, a great number of rules for the direction of their social intercourse will not be necessary. The same regulations respecting the internal order of the church will suit both cases. If protected, they are called to observe these while they lead quiet and peaceable lives, in all godliness and honesty; and if in a state of persecution, they are called either to flee, or if the persecution be less severe, in so far as they are permitted, to go on steadily in the observance of the ordinances of Christ, and abide the consequences.

But, though this system has been extensively adopted by those who are members of some established churches, it is generally found unhappily at variance with the articles they are called to subscribe. None of these, so far as I am acquainted with them, view the subject in this light. A particular form of church-government is there inculcated, and that, from the language employed, plainly to the exclusion of all others. But every one must see that this is quite inconsistent with the opinion we are considering. We may add, that few or none, even of those who professedly hold such a sentiment, seem in their reasoning on church-government fairly to follow it out. This appears from the solicitude that all parties shew, to quote as much of apostolic precept or example as possible in support of their own particular usages. But such a solicitude is virtually abandoning the opinion in question. If it be true that the external arrangements of the church are thus left to human discretion, our only concern should be to shew, that such as we adopt are fitted to attain the end we ought to have in view. Upon

this principle, if a church were placed in circumstances very different from those in which the early churches stood, totally different regulations might be necessary; and, in such a case, to quote apostolic precept or example, would not at all be in point; nay, it might rather indicate something wrong, than what could justly claim our approbation.

The second of the general opinions above mentioned, is what I have no hesitation in adopting. It is as follows: that certain regulations on the subject of church-government may be clearly discovered in the New Testament, founded either on apostolic precept or example; that these contain all that is necessary to be directly specified; and that if any case occur to which they do not immediately apply the general principles of the gospel, are sufficient to guide our decision. Here, I am aware, some will be disposed to question how far apostolic example is binding in this matter. I shall therefore state a few reasons for concluding it is.

1. I consider apostolic example and precept, so far as they regard the order of the Christian church, as amounting to the same thing. It cannot for a moment be supposed the apostles of our Lord would in this case inculcate one thing, and practise another; or practise what they did not mean to recommend as Christian duty.

2. The apostles were left in charge by their Lord and Master, to teach the disciples all things they were called to observe, Matt. xxviii. 20. If that charge, as all will allow, related to the institutions of Christ's kingdom, then their obligation to teach, includes that of Christians to learn, to listen to the injunctions the apostles have given them. If this be denied, we have

no instructions whatever on a subject the most important, and the apostolic commission has no meaning that we can attach to it.

3. If the authority of apostolic precept and example respecting church-government be questioned, then many parts of the New Testament scriptures can be to us of no service: the directions to the early churches can in the present day be of no avail. But admitting their authority, every part of the epistles is fraught with the most important instructions.

4. There is an intimate connexion between the apostolic precepts that relate to church-government, and those which are addressed to individual Christians. Certain external regulations give us an opportunity of observing these, while others do not. In many situations, for example, it is impossible to observe the rule our Lord lays down, Matt. xviii. 15. We may as well then explain away the duties of Christians to each other altogether, as those regulations by which alone an opportunity is afforded of discharging them.

5. In some cases the authority of apostolic example is directly pleaded, 1 Cor. x. 33, and xi. 1, 2. Perhaps the first verse of chap. xi. has a more immediate connexion with the conclusion of the preceding chapter, than with the following context; and in this way some may allege the command here to imitate Paul does not so directly refer to the external order of the church. This objection, however, is completely removed, if we look forward to ver. 16. In it; a regulation practised by the apostles, and the churches they planted, is clearly quoted as binding, and sufficient to settle all disputes. If universal apostolic example be not equally obligatory in other cases, it is impossible to conceive any thing more calculated to mislead, than the language which Paul here employs.

Lastly, in observing the first day of the week, the authority of apostolic example is allowed by all. If it be admitted in one case, where is the line to be drawn at which we are allowed to deviate from it? Unless its authority be acknowledged, every thing is left loose and undetermined. We have no precise rule to influence our conduct.

In maintaining the general doctrine, that certain regulations on the subject of church-government may be clearly discovered from apostolic precept or example, many will coincide; though, when they come to particulars, there will probably be a considerable diversity of opinion respecting what some of these regulations really are, as well as the degree of precision with which they are revealed. It would be unsuitable in a letter, that is only introductory to my main design, to attempt to enumerate these, or enter upon a discussion of them. Neither is it necessary here to notice the causes to which this difference of opinion may often be ascribed. Some I have heard go the length of saying, they can see every thing respecting the New Testament worship, as precisely pointed out as what related to the Mosaic economy. With these, I acknowledge I cannot agree. When I consider the very minute directions given to Moses respecting the various parts of the Old Testament worship, and compare them with what is revealed respecting the New, there seems to me a considerable difference. In the one, every individual ceremony is minutely described. Nothing whatever is left to human discretion. It must have been owing to gross negligence, or determined opposition to the divine authority, not to a misapprehension of the rule, or a difficulty in applying it, if any part of it was neglected. Perhaps here, there

could hardly be degrees of approach to the standard of duty. The man who did not implicitly obey the injunction as it stood, was chargeable with direct and wilful disobedience. From the spiritual nature, however, of the religion of the New Testament, the case I may perhaps almost say, is unavoidably different. It has to do with the minds of men, with their tempers and dispositions; and, of course, the rules that refer to spiritual worship, in their application at least, do not admit of that degree of precision which can be given to such as merely regulate external services. This idea will, perhaps, be best illustrated by an example or two. It is plain, that a man indulging in covetousness ought not to be allowed to remain as a member of a church of Christ, 1 Cor. v. 11. Is it not, however, necessarily left to the discretion of every church to judge where this charge is fairly applicable? In like manner, 1 Tim. chapter iii., the character of a bishop is particularly described. The different features there mentioned, are possessed in very different degrees. But must not individual churches determine how far the degree in which any one is distinguished by such a character, renders it proper for him to be trusted with the charge of souls? Let these cases be contrasted with the institutions in general of the Mosaic economy; and, I think, it will clearly appear, that the former unavoidably require an exercise of human discretion which the latter do not admit. It is, perhaps, partly owing to this difference, that so much is said in the New Testament respecting the important duty of forbearance. It seems almost exclusively a New Testament grace; and if the preceding observations be just, the nature of the dispensation accounts for this. From its spiritual nature there is unavoidably more occasion for its exercise.

Here, however, we must beg it may be particularly noticed, in what respect we allow the exercise of what has been called human discretion in reference to the institutions of the Christian church. We do not mean that men have a discretionary power to dispense with any of the regulations enjoined in the word, or to introduce any that are not there contained. Our only business is to discover what these are; and when discovered, faithfully to reduce them to practice. But what we contend for is, that from the spiritual nature of Christianity, it is necessary to resort to human prudence in the application of the rules already laid down, and that there is often a greater difficulty in that application, than some are disposed to admit. The opinion we would here be understood to oppose is, that which so far excludes the operation of this principle, as leads men at once to condemn those who in any degree differ from them, even in their mode of applying these rules, apparently on the supposition that no room is left for such a difference. This is indeed an opinion which, perhaps, few or none will in words avow, though many discover too much of its influence in their conduct. Nothing, perhaps, has contributed more effectually to sow divisions in churches, and to destroy that spirit of mutual forbearance, by which it is one of the peculiar glories of Christians to be distinguished.

On this part of the subject, however, I would suggest two observations. *First*, we know that every regulation necessary to the prosperity of the church of Christ is revealed in scripture, whatever difficulty any may have found in attempting to discover what these regulations are, or in reducing them to practice after they are known. *Secondly*, we know not

what additional light may, in the progress of knowledge, be thrown on some points which may appear not yet fully ascertained. It is impossible to conceive, in what a variety of ways the great Head of the church may direct the attention of his people to more enlarged views of divine truth. Of this remark we have of late had a striking illustration, in the obligations which Christians of every name have felt, to use their utmost efforts to spread the knowledge of Christianity among the heathen. It is true, one class of Christians* (to their honour be it mentioned) had for many years discovered the most ardent zeal, and unremitting activity in this labour of love. But if we speak of the general body of professing Christians in this country at least, it was a department of duty which for a considerable period had seldom or never occurred to their minds. To attempt to trace the circumstances which directed their attention to it, is here unnecessary. It is sufficient to observe, that various events in the course of providence contributed to bring it into view. Whenever it was suggested, it carried its evidence in its own bosom. It approved itself to men's consciences, as a genuine and important branch of the law of love; and now it is delightful to see, that amidst all that variety of opinion that prevails on other points among Christians, almost every man who feels the value of the gospel to his own soul, acknowledges his obligations to endeavour, in his own sphere, to diffuse the knowledge of it among his perishing brethren. With so recent an example before our eyes, it would surely be rash in the extreme to say, that there is no room left for improving in the knowledge of other departments of

* The Moravians.

revealed truth. It is by degrees, and these often very slow, that the effects of particular external arrangements are discovered. In the history of providence there are perpetually occurring some new combinations of circumstances. The church and the world are continually thrown into new situations; and these contribute to discover the tendencies of principles, which could not be so fully understood in any other way. How far, then, the many eventful changes that are at present taking place in the civil history of nations; the increasing discoveries which from this quarter are derived of the deplorable effects of gross ignorance, of public profligacy, and prevailing infidelity; the growing attention of Christians to the nature of Christ's kingdom, and to the order and discipline of his church; together with the enlarged experience they will gradually acquire of the effect of principles hitherto but little regarded:—how far these may contribute to the increase of knowledge at any succeeding period, it would be foolish to attempt to predict.

While we allow, then, remaining imperfection in our knowledge, we must admit that certain differences in opinion must be expected; and when they arise from this cause, our obligation to exercise Christian forbearance seems quite unquestionable. But it often happens, that where we find a principle that will carry us a certain length, if it suit our purpose, we are apt to make an improper use of its aid, and to stretch the application of it farther than it will fairly bear us out. This seems to have been very much the case here. Men have availed themselves of our acknowledged ignorance on some points, and of the admission of human discretion in any shape, either to suggest a general doubt respecting the existence of any parti-

cular rules on church-government which are now obligatory, or at least to produce a suspicion that it is altogether a matter of little importance, and that it is impossible to arrive at any satisfaction in our inquiries concerning it. But because there are some points, which from the present limited state of our knowledge we cannot ascertain, it surely does not follow that there are none which we can: because the exercise of human prudence must be resorted to in applying the rules of scripture, we must not infer that these rules are not sufficiently comprehensive and determinate to exclude the necessity of inventing new ones: because on some departments of a general subject we are left to entertain doubts, we are not to conclude that on others we cannot obtain certainty.

Here I beg leave to quote the very accurate language of Dr. Paley, in his late luminous work on natural theology.

“ True fortitude of understanding consists in not
 “ suffering what we know to be disturbed by what
 “ we do not know.——I take it to be a general
 “ way of infusing doubts and scruples into the mind,
 “ to recall to it its own ignorance, its own imbecillity;
 “ to tell us that upon these subjects we know little;
 “ and that little imperfectly; or rather, that we know
 “ nothing properly about the matter. These sug-
 “ gestions so fall in with our consciousnesses as some-
 “ times to produce a general distrust of our faculties
 “ and our conclusions. But this is an unfounded
 “ jealousy. The uncertainty of one thing does not
 “ necessarily affect the certainty of another thing.
 “ Our ignorance of many points need not suspend our
 “ assurance of a few. Before we yield in any parti-
 “ cular instance to the scepticism which this sort of

“ insinuation would induce, we ought accurately to
 “ ascertain whether our ignorance or doubt concern
 “ those precise points on which our conclusion rests.
 “ Other points are nothing. Our ignorance of other
 “ points may be of no consequence to these ; though
 “ they may be points, in various respects, of great
 “ importance. A just reasoner removes from his
 “ consideration, not only what he knows, but what he
 “ does not know, touching matters not strictly con-
 “ nected with his argument, *i. e.* not forming the
 “ very steps of his deduction : beyond these his know-
 “ ledge and his ignorance are alike irrelevant.”

NAT. THEOL. CHAP. V.

These observations are originally applied to philo-
 sophical subjects, and they will be allowed by all to
 contain the dictates of sound philosophy. In their
 application to the subject of church-government, they
 no less express the language of sound divinity. What
 state of mind is most desirable for a Christian here ;
 what is most conducive, we may almost add what is
 absolutely necessary to a well grounded satisfaction,
 is it not faithfully acting up to the light he has re-
 ceived while he is striving to get more ? Though
 some points appear to him yet involved in obscurity,
 there are others from which that obscurity is removed.
 Let him then walk by the rule of scripture, so far as
 he has attained. This seems quite essential to Christian
 sincerity. There is no way in which we can more
 effectually impede our improvement in the knowledge
 of divine truth, than when we can deliberately refuse
 to act according to the light we have already obtained.
 If any one is secretly conscious that there are certain
 arrangements he is convinced to be agreeable to scrip-
 ture which he is neglecting, or others he is coun-

tenancing that are opposed to it, there is plainly in this case something quite unwarrantable. Any principle that can excuse a deviation from one part of revealed truth or known duty, may be equally pleaded to excuse it from another. If such a principle be at all admitted, a flood-gate is opened for a deluge of iniquity; and whoever indulges it cannot have the testimony of his conscience, that in all things, according to his knowledge, he is endeavouring to walk so as to please God.

What, my dear brethren, would every Christian consider as the most desirable situation at the approaching hour of trial? Would he not wish to be found sitting at his Master's feet, improving day by day in the knowledge of his will, and faithfully acting agreeably to that improvement in knowledge, till the full blaze of divine truth burst upon his mind, when he shall put off this mortal, and put on immortality. May every reader, as well as the writer of these pages, be found at last in this happy posture, waiting for the second coming of the Lord.

I shall now conclude this letter by stating, in the form of a general proposition, the principle which it has been the object of the preceding observations to establish.—SO FAR AS UNIVERSAL APOSTOLIC PRACTICE RESPECTING THE ORDER AND INSTITUTIONS OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST CAN BE DISCOVERED, WE ARE CALLED TO FOLLOW IT; AND THOSE WHO CONSCIENTIOUSLY OBSERVE THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK, VIRTUALLY ADMIT THIS PRINCIPLE.

I am, &c.

LETTER III.

CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

IN the two preceding letters, I have directed your attention to some general observations on the subject of church-government; I shall now state the particular reasons which induced me to relinquish my connexion with the church of Scotland. These relate, *First*, to the *constitution* of that church; and, *Secondly*, to its *administration*.

But, before entering upon these, permit me to observe, that when I saw it my duty to take such a step, it was not the result of a hasty decision, formed without mature deliberation and serious inquiry. I recollect well, when the proposition was first made to me, to leave my charge and occupy another station unconnected with the establishment, the idea that first occurred to my mind was, that I should feel very great reluctance in acceding to it. Our inquiries, however, are frequently suggested by our circumstances. I mention this in my own case, merely as a matter of fact, and not as an apology for having previously neglected more fully to examine how far my situation was agreeable to the word of God. But the difficulties I had often experienced from that situation, led me to consider this proposal as a call to engage

in as full an investigation of the subject as possible, that in the issue I might either remain in it without uneasiness, or, from a conviction of duty, deliberately relinquish it. My only reason for noticing this circumstance here, is to shew, that if I had any bias in such an inquiry, it was in favour of my continuing in habits of professional intercourse with many valuable friends with whom I had the happiness to be intimately acquainted, to whose conversation I had been often indebted both for pleasure and improvement, and whose characters in many points I hope I shall ever esteem. But it is time I should proceed to state the result of my inquiry.

First. The constitution of the church is presbyterian, and this I consider totally unscriptural. Here it may be necessary to point out the difference between the presbyterian and independent form of church-government. The distinguishing feature of the former, is the system of representation. In a presbyterian church,* the management of each individual society is, in the first instance, entirely conducted on this plan. The minister and ruling elders, composing what is called the kirk-session, meet alone, and decide on any case of discipline that comes before them. In some cases, a sessional rebuke, as it is termed, is administered to the offender. In others of a more flagrant nature, he is, by their appointment, publicly rebuked before the congregation. In this way the general body of the church have nothing whatever

* The manner in which the word *church* is used here, and on some other occasions, is in conformity to general custom, and to denote what would be more properly expressed by a number of churches. Thus, in the church of Scotland, the church of Secession or the church of Relief, a number of individual churches are contained.

to say in the administration of its discipline. They may be satisfied or not with the propriety of it, as they are not informed of the principles on which in any particular case it is conducted. The decision of the session is only known from the result. Under this form of church-government too, the representatives of so many neighbouring churches meet in common council; and to these thus assembled, the individual churches, or rather kirk-sessions, are amenable. Their discipline may be reviewed, their decisions reversed, and new ones dictated, which they are bound to obey.*

* In the following extract, taken from Dr. Hill's publication formerly quoted, we have a full confirmation of *authority* being thus substituted in the room of *conviction*, in the government of the church of Scotland. "In testimony of that subordination of judicatories which pervades the church of Scotland, it is a standing order, that the books containing the minutes of the inferior court shall be laid before the court immediately above it. In the ordinary course of ecclesiastical business this is often neglected. But a superior court may, at any time, issue a peremptory mandate for the production of the books of its subordinate judicatories; and having the whole train of their proceedings thus regularly submitted to its inspection, it may take such measures as, upon this review, appear to be necessary, in order to correct errors, to redress wrongs, to enforce observance of general rules, and to promote the edification of the people in the several districts within its bounds."

In another passage of the same work, we have the following account of the power vested in the General Assembly, the supreme court of review. This is nothing else than the same system that I have described above, on a more extended scale; as presbyteries are subordinate to synods, and synods to the General Assembly, in the same way that kirk-sessions are to presbyteries. "Ever since the establishment of the church of Scotland, and particularly since patrons were restored to their ancient rights by the act 1712, presbyteries, even when they did not find any defect in the personal qualifications of the presentee, have often, from a supposed deficiency in his call, from regard to the wishes of the people, or from some local circumstances, delayed or even refused to settle him."

In an independent church, on the other hand, nothing is decided by representation. - Whatever is done by those who are appointed to rule, is carried on in the presence of the general body, and with their consent. This is equally conducive to their improvement in knowledge, and to their satisfaction with any decision that may be formed. In this way, ruling and teaching are associated together. If an individual member has any difficulty with any measure the church at large may adopt, he has an opportunity of stating it and of having it removed, of having the law explained by which such a measure is sanctioned, and the grounds pointed out on which that particular application of the law rests. While an independent church thus assumes the sole government of its own affairs, it is amenable to no society of men under heaven. In reference to its own members its decision is final, and it pretends to interfere with none else.

Some, indeed, have insinuated, that the meeting, in association of the representatives of independent churches, comes pretty near the institution of pres-

“ When the matter is brought before the General Assembly, that supreme court, if satisfied that the conduct of the presbytery was not warranted by the laws of the church, interposes its authority, and enjoins them to proceed with all convenient speed, according to the rules of the church, to receive and admit the presentee minister of the vacant parish. If the reluctance discovered by the members of the presbytery appears to be such that they cannot safely be trusted with any discretionary powers, the General Assembly appoints the particular days of their meeting, in order to take the steps previous to the settlement; prescribes the whole course of their procedure, and constitutes them, in that particular case, the ministerial officers of the General Assembly, who are not allowed to exercise their own judgment, but are required implicitly to obey the instructions given by their superiors.”—HILL'S THEOL. INST. p. 123, 143.

bytery. As this, however, forms no part of the system of independency, I should not probably have taken notice of it here, had I not repeatedly heard this allegation brought forward against an association of ministers that occasionally meets in this place, and the resolutions of which were published in the *Missionary Magazine* for December 1802. With regard to this particular association, I must remark, that any comparison of this kind must be founded on a complete misapprehension of the nature and design of our institution. It is not in the character of representatives at all that we meet, but for our mutual improvement as individuals; and in the first of the resolutions above alluded to, our decided opposition to the distinguishing character of presbytery, as interfering with the concerns of individual churches, is explicitly declared.

But, even where associations are composed of those who are representatives of independent churches, between these and a meeting of presbytery there is this radical difference. In the former, the independency of the individual churches is preserved inviolate; while this is a principle to which the latter is directly opposed. If there be meetings in which this principle is infringed, by whatever name they are called, so far from attempting to defend them, I consider them as subversive of the leading character by which independent government is distinguished; and the churches to which such representatives belong, ought carefully to watch against every encroachment on their Christian liberty. It seems, however, by no means inconsistent with this form of government, that neighbouring churches should avail themselves of the benefit of each other's opinion in cases of difficulty that may occur. We all

acknowledge our obligations to receive increasing light on every part of the revealed will of God, from whatever quarter it may be derived. Some of the members of one church may have more knowledge than those of another, or from their particular situations, may have had more experience of the effects of this or the other mode of conducting a particular case of discipline. Individual churches, I suppose, are sensible that they learn something from almost every case that comes before them; and may we not improve by the experience of our brethren, as well as by our own. So far, then, as associations may contribute, by the friendly interchange of opinion among those whose minds have been directed to the same subject, to throw increasing light on any part of the law of Christ, they seem calculated to be useful, and to contain nothing inconsistent with the strictest principles of independency. But, is there no difference between *opinion* and *authority*? between availing ourselves of a suggestion which we see founded on scripture, and which approves itself to our conscience, and obeying a command which we do not see to be scriptural, by which the rights of conscience are directly violated, and of course sin committed by those who submit? If so, then presbytery, and an association of the representatives of independent churches, are of the same import. But, as long as in such meetings nothing but opinion is suggested, an essential difference subsists between them. Though, however, on these principles such institutions seem defensible; yet, as there may be a danger of substituting the influence of an association, composed of the representatives of churches, in the room of that personal conviction which the members of a church must feel in order to

exercise spiritual obedience ; and as all the good that can accrue from such institutions, may be equally derived from ministers or others meeting as individuals : this last kind of them seems decidedly preferable.

Having thus stated the distinction between these two modes of church-government, I shall first mention the grounds on which it appears that the apostolic churches were independent, and then consider the principal argument urged in support of the presbyterian form.

The first passage I shall mention, from which the system of independency seems to be established, is Matt. xviii. 15—17, where our Lord gives his people particular directions respecting their conduct in case of offences. “ Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass
“ against thee, go and tell him his fault between
“ thee and him alone : if he shall hear thee, thou
“ hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear
“ thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in
“ the mouth of two or three witnesses every word
“ may be established. And if he shall neglect to
“ hear them, tell it unto the church : but if he ne-
“ glect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an
“ heathen man and a publican.” In the scriptures, the word *church* has two significations. It either denotes the whole assembly of those redeemed by the blood of Christ, or an individual society. In this last sense it is sometimes applied to a meeting of any description. It is thus used, Acts xix. 32, where the word, generally translated *church*, is rendered assembly. When in this last and more restricted sense it is applied to Christians, it is plainly descriptive of those who meet together for Christian fellowship in an individual society. Agreeably to

this, it is deserving of remark, that when the Christians scattered over a province are mentioned, who of course met in different societies, the word *church* is always found in the plural. Thus we have the churches of Judea, the churches of Macedonia, the churches of Galatia, &c. Examples of the first use of the term occur, Col. i. 18. Eph. i. 22. Heb. xii. 23.; and of the second, Acts ix. 31. xiv. 23. 1 Cor. xiv. 23. In no case does it seem employed to denote the rulers of a church, as distinguished from the general body; though in Acts xv. 22. it is used to describe the latter of these, as distinguished from the former. As in the passage then above quoted, it would be impossible to comply with the admonition, if by the word *church* the *church universal* is meant, it is plain the expression cannot be understood in any other sense than as denoting the particular society of Christians with which we are connected. To these the offence is to be told. If the offending brother will not hear them, he is to be viewed as a heathen man and a publican, in the same light as those who are still in a state of heathenism, and not members of the church at all; in other words, he is to be excluded from the society. In this passage nothing seems plainer than that the decision of the church is to be considered as final. There is not the smallest hint about the possibility of an appeal; nay, we may safely assert, that, with such a system as a court of review, by which the decision of an individual society may be reversed, the language of our Lord is altogether incompatible.

The same doctrine seems, with equal decision, established from the uniform mode in which the apostle Paul addresses the different churches to whom he writes. In the course of his epistles, he has fre-

quently occasion to animadvert with considerable severity on different parts of their conduct. While with all fidelity he points out in what respects they had departed from the right path, he charges them to return to it. But, is there a hint dropped about other churches being consulted; or, is it ever insinuated that if an individual church should act improperly, part of the blame should be borne by the representatives of neighbouring ones, whose authority might influence their conduct? We have a striking instance of pretty severe reproof in the first epistle to the Corinthians. A peculiarly gross offender is mentioned in chapter v. as having appeared among them; and the other members are sharply rebuked, for having discovered a very unsuitable degree of lenity towards him. The apostle, after stating the law of Christ's kingdom, that applied to such a case which perfectly corresponds with that which had been previously enacted by his divine Master, concludes with these words, verse 13. "Therefore, put away from among yourselves that wicked person." I think it must be allowed by every unprejudiced inquirer, that, upon the supposition that this church had the sole management of its own affairs, the language used here, as well as throughout the whole epistle, is correct and apposite. Upon this supposition, it was the business of the general body of the members to rectify what was amiss; and with them alone lay the blame, if it was not corrected. The same thing, however, cannot be said, if presbyterian government was sanctioned by apostolic authority. If a reference to other churches was proper, and none was made, can we suppose the apostle would take no notice of this impropriety; or that, while he had so often to admini-

ster reproof both to this and some other churches, not a single hint should occur respecting a court of review, either attaching blame to those who neglected to appeal to it, or allowing it to share their guilt, if they were misled by its decision.

Here, some may allege that this reasoning is equally hostile to those associations in which the opinion of the members of other churches is consulted, as to our submitting to their authority. The remarks we have already made on these, and on what principles we consider them defensible, may sufficiently obviate this objection. We may here, however, add, that the allegation might have some force, if an argument were urged in support of these meetings from direct apostolic example, unless a case of such consultation could be fairly established. It is not, however, on this ground we would for a moment countenance them, but merely on the principle of general expediency, while they contain nothing inconsistent with any part of revealed truth. We consider them not as commanded, but authorized; not as establishing any authority different from that which existed in the apostolic churches, but as contributing by the mutual interchange of opinion, to assist us in the discovery and application of that already established. Though we are authorized to resort to every expedient method by which we may more clearly understand the laws of Christ's kingdom, it surely does not follow that we are allowed to add to them. Let it then be recollected, that the question at present is not respecting the expediency of any particular measure (on this, so far as it regards presbyterian government, we shall afterwards have occasion to animadvert); but what was the form of

government adopted by the apostolic churches, and thus sanctioned by apostolic authority.

But, although it is pretty generally allowed that little can be pleaded in support of the presbyterian form of church-government from the apostolic epistles, there is a well known passage in the xv. chapter of the Acts of the apostles, on which the defence of this system is generally rested. This I long considered as a strong hold, in which I could sit in safety, and subscribe myself a presbyterian. I shall now shortly state the arguments by which, in my apprehension at least, it was no longer tenable.

The occasion of the appeal to the church of Jerusalem here mentioned, which has been so often urged in support of presbyterian government, is distinctly stated in the two first verses. After Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch, having finished their first mission to the heathen, we learn that “certain
“men which came down from Judea taught the brethren and said, except ye be circumcised after the
“manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension
“and disputation with them, they determined that
“Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should
“go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders
“about this question.” We find accordingly, from the subsequent part of the chapter, they went. A meeting was called; the question was agitated; a decision was formed; and that decision was transmitted by the hands of Judas and Silas, in conjunction with Paul and his companion, to the church at Antioch. Without deeming it here necessary to quote the chapter at large, which can easily be consulted by any

one who chooses to examine the subject, I beg leave to suggest the following observations on it.

1. If, as was formerly stated, the distinguishing feature of presbytery is the system of representation, it may seem peculiarly strange that ever this passage should have been quoted in support of it. It was not representatives from the church at Jerusalem that met alone on this occasion, but the rulers of it in conjunction with the whole body. Accordingly, ver. 22, they are represented as all uniting in the decision that was formed on the question appealed; and, in like manner, when that decision was transmitted to Antioch, it was the multitude, ver. 30, plainly meaning the church at large, that was gathered together to receive it. This, surely, savours much more of the independent, than of the presbyterian form of church-government.

2. There was something more in this case which made it obviously very different from the presbyteries or synods of modern times. We have not in this passage an account of representatives assembled in convocation from a variety of different churches, where a certain number is essentially necessary to constitute what is termed the court: we have simply an application from one individual church to another, respecting a contested question that occurred, and that had been suggested by persons professedly coming from that church to which the application was made. But farther, even in this appeal there were such striking peculiarities, as when impartially considered, will, I think, make it clearly appear, that it affords no example on which we can found the propriety of a similar appeal to any other church whatever. These I shall mention in the following observations, and accordingly remark,

3. The subject of the appeal was peculiar. It has indeed been matter of dispute, whether the question respecting the liberty of the Gentiles related to all converts from heathenism, or only to those who were converted to Christianity from among such as were previously religious proselytes. It is not here necessary to enter into that discussion; it is sufficient to observe, that whether it be understood to refer to the one or the other, it was a question of very extensive importance at that time to the Christian world; a question of such a kind too, that no similar one can now occur, and which only needed once to be decided, effectually to settle the dispute at every succeeding period.

4. It seems pretty obvious, that when Paul speaks of going up to Jerusalem by revelation, Gal. ii. 2, he alludes to the journey he took on this occasion; and this furnishes another striking peculiarity in the case before us. On this passage in the epistle to the Galatians, I beg leave to quote the words of a commentator of considerable eminence, who cannot be suspected of writing with any design to favour the principles of independency. "*I went up by revelation.*" "This circumstance shews, that the occasion of the
 "present journey was of great importance. We may
 "therefore believe it was the journey which, at the
 "desire of the church at Antioch, Paul and Barnabas
 "undertook for the purpose of consulting the apostles
 "and elders in Jerusalem, concerning the circum-
 "cision of the converted proselytes, of which Luke
 "has given an account, Acts xv. That question
 "having occasioned great dissensions at Antioch,
 "and the very existence of the gospel depending on
 "its decision, it was necessary to determine it in the

“ most public and authentic manner. Now, of all
 “ the methods that could be devised for that purpose,
 “ to consult the apostles, the elders and the church
 “ at Jerusalem, was certainly the most effectual. For,
 “ if after due deliberation on the question, they de-
 “ clared the Gentile proselytes free from the law of
 “ Moses as a term of their salvation, their decision
 “ would have great weight with the whole body of
 “ the disciples. Besides, as the decision of that vener-
 “ able assembly was to be founded on the witness
 “ which the Holy Ghost had borne to Cornelius and
 “ the other uncircumcised Gentiles who were with
 “ him, by falling on them while Peter was speaking
 “ to them, Acts, x. 44, as he fell on the one hundred
 “ and twenty at the beginning, Acts ii. 4, the assem-
 “ bling of the apostles and elders and brethren, in so
 “ solemn a manner to decide this question, would be
 “ of great benefit to the church in after ages; because
 “ the descent of the Holy Ghost on the first Gentile
 “ converts being mentioned as the ground of their de-
 “ cision, the truth of that great miracle would, by the
 “ united testimony of such a multitude of credible
 “ witnesses, be put beyond all doubt. This observa-
 “ tion throws a beautiful light on the expression in the
 “ decree, Acts xv. 28. *It seemed good to the Holy Ghost*
 “ *and to us ; it seemed good to the Holy Ghost*, who hath
 “ borne witness to the uncircumcised Gentiles, by
 “ shedding down the gifts upon them, *and to us*, who
 “ have rightly interpreted the import of that witness.
 “ In this view the elders and brethren are mentioned
 “ with great propriety in the decree, along with the
 “ apostles, Acts xv. 23. They, as well as the apostles,
 “ were certainly informed of the effusion of the Spirit
 “ on the uncircumcised Gentiles, and were well qua-

“lified to attest that extraordinary event. The ad-
 “vantage which would attend the decision of this
 “question by the apostles, elders, and brethren in
 “Jerusalem, being so great, that method was suggest-
 “ed by revelation to Paul. And he having com-
 “municated it to the church at Antioch, they sent
 “him and Barnabas to Jerusalem to lay the matter
 “before the apostles and brethren. Wherefore, though
 “Paul was sent by the church at Antioch ; yet, if
 “they were directed by a revelation made to Paul to
 “send him, he might justly say he went up by re-
 “velation.”—M^YKNIGHT ON GAL. ii. 2.

5. Observe the very peculiar circumstances in which
 the church at Jerusalem stood, from its being the seat
 of the residence of the apostles. To them was com-
 mitted the important charge of teaching the disciples
 all things whatsoever they should observe. At this
 time it is very questionable, if any part of the New
 Testament scriptures was committed to writing. At
 any rate, we know that none of the apostolic epistles
 had yet any existence ; far less were they collected as
 we have them now, for the benefit of Christians at
 large, and for their direction in any case of difficulty
 that might occur. This certainly placed the church
 at Jerusalem in a situation altogether peculiar. The
 apostles then occupied the room that the New Testa-
 ment scriptures do now. It was as proper to consult
 them personally at that time, as it is for us now to
 have recourse to their writings, to decide upon any
 point of New Testament worship. It is true Paul
 was at Antioch ; and he undoubtedly possessed inspir-
 ation and apostolic authority, as well as the rest. But
 on that occasion, the persons who taught that doc-
 trine respecting the necessity of circumcision came

from Judea, the seat of the rest of the apostles. It is pretty apparent from ver. 24, that these persons represented them as favouring their views. In this situation Paul must have had an authority, at least paramount to his own alleged in opposition to it. Nothing in this case could give such perfect satisfaction, as the united decision of the apostles when assembled together.

6. Remark the peculiar manner in which they could express their decision, as well as the grounds on which that decision was formed. They could say assuredly, as in ver. 28, it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us. It is observable that expression is in the past time. *It seemed good.* From this the decision appears plainly to have been grounded on the unquestionable displays of the miraculous operation of the Holy Ghost in what had been previously stated by Peter, as well as Barnabas and Paul. The first, ver. 7, rose up and said, "Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago, God made choice among us that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel and believe." In this he plainly alludes to the case of Cornelius, where, by a miraculous vision, he was directed to go to the Gentiles. In like manner, ver. 12, Paul and Barnabas declared what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them. I know it has been here alleged, that because the decision was not pronounced by immediate or individual apostolic authority, but arrived at after much disputing on the subject, it is not to be viewed in the same light with other express dictates of inspiration. It may here be remarked, the expression seems by no means necessarily to imply opposition of sentiment, but simply mutual discussion or inquiry. It is indeed the same word, rendered *dispu-*

tation, ver. 2; but there it is connected with another translated *dissension*, which from its use in other passages, clearly indicates the most decided opposition of sentiment. This is apparent from its being used, chap. xxiii. 7, 10, to denote the dissension that took place between the Pharisees and Sadducees. It would rather then argue a tautology in the sacred writer, if in ver. 2. of this chapter, he employs two words to express precisely the same idea. But waving this remark, and admitting that there really was a debate in the church on this occasion, Dr. Doddridge's note on the passage seems extremely just. "This dispute," he observes, "does not appear to have been among the apostles themselves; and if they really had debated the case awhile, their decision at last might have been under an unerring direction: and I know not any reason to conclude that their inspiration was always so instantaneous and express, as to supersede any deliberation of their own minds, or any consultation with each other." It surely is not our province to regulate the particular mode in which the Holy Spirit is to communicate his influences. I suppose no one calls in question the infallibility of this decision, by whatever process it was formed; and on such a question, infallibility and inspiration are of the same import. This, then, is enough for our argument. While the apostles were at Jerusalem; while they could give an infallible answer to the question appealed to them; while they could assuredly say, thus "it seemed good to the Holy Ghost," and quote miracles in support of the assertion; then the church at Jerusalem was in a state totally peculiar; and an appeal to it in such circumstances, forms no argument for a similar appeal to any other church. But,

7. What has always appeared to me the most decisive proof that this passage affords no countenance to modern presbytery, arises from the issue of the decision the church at Jerusalem pronounced, on the question that was laid before them. They not only send their decision to Antioch, but to Syria and Cælicia, ver. 23; and we learn from chap. xvi. ver. 4, when Paul and Silas went out on Paul's second journey, "they delivered in the different cities the decrees for to keep that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem." Here, those who support presbytery from this passage, seem inextricably involved in a dilemma. It must be allowed these decrees were either binding or not. If they were not, then the whole was merely an application for advice, and the passage has no connexion with presbyterial authority. If they were binding, then it follows that the church at Jerusalem ordained decrees which were obligatory not only on the church at Antioch, but on every other church in the Christian world, though they had not the shadow of a representative in that meeting where the decrees were formed. Surely this puts it beyond the possibility of a doubt that the case was an extraordinary one, and consequently forms no precedent for other churches. If it was not extraordinary, let us see to what it will lead. It ought then to be imitated, that is, one church should frame decrees to which it is entitled to require obedience from every other church in the Christian world. What church is entitled to claim such a prerogative?—But it is unnecessary to pursue the argument farther, as the inference implies what is impracticable and absurd. Some, we may add, aware of these consequences, in order to avoid them, have gone the length of *supposing* that there

might be representatives at Jerusalem from other churches. This is in other words giving up the point. If we were allowed to make such suppositions, and argue from them where there is not the least shadow of evidence, it would be impossible to prove any thing. To any man who has even a superficial acquaintance with the rules of correct reasoning, this requires no answer.

Here I must remind you of the position we formerly endeavoured to establish; that we are bound to follow apostolic example, so far as we can discover it respecting the arrangements of the church of Christ. If this position then be a just one, with such views as I have just stated of the constitution of the apostolic churches, and of the principal passage from which presbyterian government has been maintained, no one will be surprised that I could no longer allow my name to be affixed to a formula, which requires that every subscriber should be convinced that this mode is founded on, and agreeable to, the word of God.

I am, &c.

LETTER IV.

CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

IT was the object of my last letter to shew, that presbyterian government appears supported neither by apostolic precept nor example. That the authority which it gives to one church over another, did not exist in the apostolic age; and that the only case which has been considered as in any shape countenancing it, has such peculiarities as to furnish no precedent. It may be proper here to add a few observations on the leading peculiarity by which the presbyterian is distinguished from the independent form of church-government.

It will be recollected, that this peculiarity consists in the authority of the representatives of a church of Christ, as distinguished from the personal conviction of the individual members of it. Now, we have no hesitation in asserting, that this distinguishing feature of presbytery is directly opposed to the general spirit, as well as some of the express precepts of the word of God. Every one will allow that Christianity is a spiritual religion; and it seems a necessary principle in such a religion, that every one be convinced in his own mind. The conscience of the individual here has a most extensive sphere of influence. Its approbation is essen-

tially necessary to the very existence of any act of acceptable worship. "Whatever is not of faith is sin." The moment that compulsion is introduced, spiritual worship is destroyed. This general position, I believe, few will dispute; but mark how it affects the case in question. What is the meaning of the *authority* vested in a presbytery, of that power by which they can command any one under their jurisdiction to act according to their will? Does not the very existence of this *authority* imply the necessity of it? Does it not prove that advice is not sufficient; that the conscience of the individual is not convinced; that something more powerful than persuasion must be resorted to? There could be no room for authority, if conviction were deemed necessary, because it is only by instruction and persuasion that it is produced. Like the sensitive plant, it shrinks at the gentlest touch of *power*, and the rude intruder must be completely withdrawn, before it again exert its energy. On these principles I consider the authority of presbytery as standing upon a most unscriptural basis. The full amount of any advantage that can accrue from the intercourse of neighbouring churches is attained, when by friendly interchange of opinion they contribute to their mutual improvement in knowledge, and when they can enjoy the benefit of opinion and advice in cases of difficulty that occur. Step beyond this limit, and you get immediately on antichristian ground. A system of unscriptural authority is introduced, mutual confidence is banished, and a spirit of mutual jealousy occupies its room.

I have sometimes met with good men among some classes of presbyterian dissenters in this country, who endeavoured to obviate this reasoning by alleging that

though a most unsuitable exercise of presbyterial authority frequently appears in the established church, they, while associated with men who understand and respect the rights of conscience, are in no risk of, in a similar way, suffering from it. In their presbyteries, I have been told, no one thinks of compelling a brother to engage in any service which he cannot conscientiously approve. I do not question how far the evils of a bad system may be mitigated, when it is under the direction of godly men; nor how far the benefits of a good one may be perverted by men of an opposite description. But the question here is, does such an authority exist? We allow it is inexpedient, unchristian; but is it *unconstitutional* to exert it? If not, there must be a radical evil in that system by which such an authority is at all recognised. If a principle is such, that good men would not think of acting upon it, would it not be better avowedly to disclaim it, than still to retain it as a professed part of their creed?*

* Among the presbyterian dissenters indeed in this country, I believe no such unchristian exercise of power is to be met with, as frequently occurs in the established church. I have heard, however, from those connected both with the Burghers and Anti-burghers (I am not acquainted with what takes place in the church of Relief), that at least, something like an approach to it is occasionally found among them. If I am rightly informed, it sometimes happens that a preacher receives a call to different places at one time, and in this case the synod decides which of these calls he is to accept. If in such a situation he chooses entirely to leave it to their decision, it is well. But if, on the other hand, he should see it his duty to accept of one of them, though his brethren should entertain a different opinion, surely no other kind of influence than that of persuasion should be employed. It is proper that in any step of our public conduct, we should hear the sentiments of our brethren, and weigh their arguments. But in every case a man's own mind must ultimately decide what is to him the path of duty. To employ any other kind of in-

With regard to the established church, we know well with what triumphant severity, when an opportunity occurs, this authority is exercised. But, of all the complaints I have met with against the exercise of it, I do not recollect having heard it alleged, that in itself it was unconstitutional. The power then exists. It is a branch of presbytery; and it is on this ground we consider the system that countenances it inconsistent with the word of God.

To this objection some may be disposed to reply. This authority, we acknowledge, is often employed in such a manner as bears hard on those that are subjected to it, and is accompanied with very material inconveniences. But we are not to imagine that these are exclusively attached to presbyterian churches. Are you not exposed to similar ones in those of the independent form? Must not the minority there, in like manner, submit to the majority? If they cannot conscientiously do so, is there any alternative left, except that of separating from the society? As I trust, brethren, I have no object in view but the discovery of truth, I am happy to consider any plausible objection that has been brought forward to the system I consider as the scriptural one, and to state what at least has satisfied my own mind as an answer to it. Here, then, it may be first observed, any independent church would act very inconsistently with their professed principles,

fluence than that of persuasion to prevent a man from complying with the call of a congregation, while he sees it his duty to do so, seems an exercise of power inconsistent with the spirit of the New Testament. I should be happy to find this note, if it come under the review of any of the numerous respectable ministers of the above-mentioned connexions, suggest to them the importance of examining this point more fully.

if in a case of difficulty that occurred where there was room for Christians to differ in opinion, they were not disposed to exercise a spirit of mutual forbearance. If, while one part of them could conscientiously engage in any particular service, and another could not, any think like compulsion were to be employed by the former to induce the latter to act according to their views, I should not think for a moment of defending such a conduct. The only case which I can at all conceive somewhat to come under the objection, is the following. Suppose a case of discipline to occur in an independent church, in which a difference of opinion obtained, how far a charge was distinctly proved. The church must act in one way or another. If the party be excluded against whom the charge is brought, those who think him not guilty will take offence at the measure. If, on the other hand, he be continued in communion without reproof, those who consider him guilty will be equally offended. I suppose the most strenuous opponent of independency could not wish a stronger case stated. Some of my independent brethren, on the other hand, will perhaps think it is too strong a one, and not at all likely to take place. I readily acknowledge it would argue some material deficiency on one side or another in the exercise of Christian principles, before things could come this length. When we consider the opportunity the independent form of government affords, of hearing and discussing every suggestion of the members, and of joining as a body in prayer in every case of difficulty, to the great Head of the church for direction, while they are encouraged by the promise that, "if two agree on earth as touching any thing they shall ask, it shall be done for them;" we have surely reason to infer, that if the

rulers conduct matters even with tolerable caution, such a case is seldom likely to occur in practice. But admitting the objection in its fullest force, supposing the situation of things such as above stated, and that as either on the one side or the other forbearance can no longer be exercised, a separation must ensue; even this argues nothing against the independent form of church-government. The reason is this. Such an inconvenience is an unavoidable result of social worship, and of the formation of Christian churches, as long as imperfection of knowledge and of character remains. But these are express duties. Whatever, then, is attachable to a directly revealed duty cannot be charged against any particular form of church-government. Could presbytery be as directly proved from scripture, as the obligation of Christians to associate together in church-fellowship, we should have no hesitation in supporting it, with whatever inconvenience it might be attended. But if our former observations on this subject are just, we have seen that presbytery extends the range of this inconvenience, where the existence of churches by no means requires it, without any countenance either from apostolic precept or example, and in direct opposition to the general spirit of the gospel of Christ.

It may now be proper to examine a little some of the grounds, on which good men still continue to countenance the presbyterian form of church-government, notwithstanding what appears to others at least very decisive evidence against it. Some, I believe, still hold the divine right of presbytery, that is, that it exclusively is the form of government instituted in the word of God; and that every departure from it is a gross deviation from the standard of revealed truth.

upon that subject. The number of such abettors of this system is now, however, comparatively small. By these the above reasoning must be condemned at once, as containing positions most erroneous, if not approaching to something like downright heresy. Others are not so sure that these reasonings are false; yet, as they are not clear that there are any express injunctions in scripture respecting church-government, they act on the general principle of expediency. It is on this ground they countenance presbytery. They think that when any case of difficulty occurs in an independent church, the members of it are apt to be influenced by-party spirit, by personal animosities, or by local prejudices; and that as others from a distance are able to judge more impartially, it is proper that their influence should be interposed when such cases occur. We have already observed how far we conceive a particular form of church-government is enjoined in the word of God. But waving this, what sort of influence is here to be employed? If this reasoning be adopted in support of the propriety of *consulting* neighbouring churches, of obtaining their *opinion*, of deriving from the interchange of sentiment all that accuracy of discrimination in judging of a case of difficulty which it is fitted to impart, we have no objections to it. All these advantages may be effectually obtained in the intercourse of independent churches. But this is something very different from the influence of coercion. This is a kind of influence, which we have already endeavoured to prove, Christianity does not acknowledge.

But though our opinion regarding what is expedient is what we do not admit as a rule of conduct, where apostolic precept or example is interposed, we shall

here state a few remarks on the supposed expediency that is attached to presbyterian government. So far do we conceive it from being an arrangement conducive to general utility, that it appears quite the reverse. It tends to propagate corruption, and to prevent reform. Suppose a church on the presbyterian model, at first comparatively pure, (as it is generally supposed, perhaps, in some cases justly, that churches in their early days are,) but by degrees corruption creeps into it. As soon as that corruption infects the majority, from the power which presbytery gives them over the rest, they can force their purer brethren, however reluctantly, to assimilate themselves to their corrupt standard. If, for example, in a presbytery one congregation after another begins to lose sight of Christian discipline; whenever the greater part of that presbytery does so, the rest, however much disposed, can no longer maintain it. If an individual in one of these purer congregations feel himself aggrieved, an appeal to the majority secures him redress. The system then tends to drag down those who would act on Christian principles to a conformity to such as have departed from them. Again, it equally tends to prevent reform. If, amidst general corruption, a spirit of reform should appear in a single congregation, the authority of the rest is a bar in its way. This is, we believe, in some cases severely felt. Suppose a minister in the established church (and in some instances, we trust, it is not merely matter of supposition), in the progress of his inquiries respecting Christian discipline, is convinced that it is very partially, if at all maintained in his congregation, admitting that even a majority of his people held the same sentiments; is it not obvious, that unless the presby-

tery in general were of a similar opinion, any attempt at reform in that congregation would prove nugatory and vain.* The same inconvenience does not attend independent churches. We are far from insinuating, that any form of church-government presents an effectual bar to that corruption to which all institutions, conducted by depraved and fallible men, are liable; but admitting among independent churches the most general departure from Christian principles to prevail, if in the midst of this an individual congregation is led to study greater purity, the system at least presents no external obstacle to counteract it.

In reply to this, perhaps it will be alleged, that on the same principle where the majority is in the right, the presbyterian form of government will equally tend to keep individual churches from going wrong. Some, perhaps, who may be disposed to urge this argument, will, on other occasions, remind us of the brighter days and the purer periods of the church of Scotland. Have we not then in her history a luminous display of the efficacy of presbytery, in securing against general corruption? Here, indeed, it may be insinuated, the case is not a fair one, as the corruptions that exist in that establishment may be ascribed to other causes. Well, it is to the system we must look, and to its natural tendency. How then, does it tend to prevent corruption? Not by admonition or persuasion. These, indeed, it does not exclude; but this is a kind of influence, which is acknowledged in its fullest latitude by

* It is evident the same reasoning will apply to the subjection of presbyteries to synods, and of synods to a General Assembly. From the authority possessed by this last court, there is no reform of a public nature that could be attempted in any department of the church, which it is not in its power effectually to prevent.

independent churches; and, therefore, respecting the propriety of adopting it there is no dispute. The stern tone of authority then, is the only method of preventing corruption, by which presbytery is distinguished. It, indeed, like other modes of compulsion, may produce hypocrisy, but it can never promote spiritual obedience. It was never a kind of influence sanctioned by Him who reigns over a "willing people."

If the foregoing observations be well founded, they seem to afford the following conclusion. Presbytery extends the range of general corruption, where it prevails and makes provision for effectually counteracting the reform of individual churches where it might take place. Independency prevents particular churches from being affected by the corruptions of others, any farther than is unavoidable from the contagious influence of bad example; while in the midst of general corruption it presents no extraneous obstacle to the reform of individual churches.

Another source from which some derive ease to their minds, while they avow themselves presbyterians, though they are not quite certain that this form of church-government is revealed in scripture, is the particular mode of expression that is adopted in the formula they are called to subscribe. They expressly assert their belief, that presbytery is *founded on, and agreeable to the word of God*. Now, their reasonings are to this effect. We do not see any particular mode of church-government enjoined in the New Testament. We are therefore entirely at liberty to adopt any one which may seem conducive to the purposes of edification. We conceive presbytery, if properly conducted, to be of this description; and on these grounds we can avow our belief that it is *founded on, and agreeable to the word of God*.

Besides, as church-government is a point of inferior magnitude, the minute distinctions persons make on that subject, or the particular views they entertain, should not interfere with their occupying a station of important and extensive usefulness. We may fairly mention this as a pretty common apology, not only from personal experience, but from an acquaintance with the opinion of others on this subject. In the season of doubt and uneasiness, when inquiry becomes the most formidable foe, we have often resorted to it as a shield by which we might be protected from the darts of the enemy. It does not appear, however, very solid relief, which the mind can receive from any supposed ambiguity in the expression *founded on, and agreeable to the word of God*. Certainly the compilers of the Confession of Faith were, *bona fide*, presbyterians. It was never their intention to insinuate, by this expression, that this was one form of which, as well as others, a subscriber of the formula expressed his approbation. If this were even doubtful from the words it employs, it will be very apparent if we attend to some things in its history. The expressions respecting church-government, in the formula which was formerly subscribed by those who entered the church of Scotland, were altered in the year 1711, and the following is an abridged account of the reason of this alteration, as given by the late Mr. Randall of Stirling, a writer whose correctness of information on such subjects few will be disposed to question.

At the Revolution, patronage was found inconvenient, and subject to great abuse. It was therefore laid aside, and in its room a new constitution for the settling of ministers formed, in which when a parish became vacant, the heritors (being Protestant)

and elders were to propose to the congregation the person by whom the vacancy was to be filled up. An attempt to restore the law of patronage was meditated in 1703, but was not then carried into execution. What proved abortive, however, at that period, succeeded in 1711, when under the Tory administration, in the end of Queen Anne's reign, patrons were restored to their ancient rights. It is probable, according to this author, that the design of the supporters of patronage, both in 1703 and 1711, was, by means of it, to introduce into the church, men most tractable to their own ultimate and darling object, the restoration of Episcopacy and unlimited prerogative. This scheme plainly appears to have transpired in 1703, from the printed sermon which Mr. Meldrum preached before the parliament of that year, in which he declares, upon the proposal of restoring patronages, that the plan was thereby to say, as in Ezra iv. 2, "Let us build with you;" and Neh. iv. 11, "They shall not know nor see till we come in the midst of them." As it also seemed evidently the object of the Tories in 1711, under the patronage act, to introduce their friends, or, in other words, those friendly to Episcopacy into the ministry; "aware," says our author, "of the danger, the church then saw it necessary to make her formula, to be subscribed by entrants into the churches, more precise in respect to presbyterian government than formerly, in order to guard against false brethren in that view coming into her bosom." Thus far Mr. Randall.* We may just add, that this account is amply confirmed by a comparison of the language used in the formula of 1694, with what occurs in that of 1711, respecting the article of church-

* Tracts concerning patronage, p. 46—49.

government. A subscriber of the former declares, that he owns and acknowledges the presbyterian government of this church as settled by law, to be the only government of this church, and that he will submit thereto and concur therewith, &c. A subscriber of the latter asserts his persuasion, that it is founded on, and agreeable to the word of God.*

Although then, we conceive the good men who compiled the formula, as well as those who altered it, in their opinions on church-government, as well as on some other points, unquestionably to have erred, we believe they held their errors conscientiously. They fairly acted according to their light. It is a refinement that has been reserved for later times, for men deliberately to attach their signature to a formula, a great part of the doctrines of which they really do not believe.† But whatever use may have been made

* These two formulas, in so far as respects the subject of church-government, may be seen in the *Quarterly Magazine* for March 1798, published at Edinburgh.

† It is pretty generally known that this doctrine has been openly espoused by Archdeacon Paley, in his principles of moral philosophy. He maintains, for example, that one who subscribes the articles of the church of England, has only to inquire what was the design of the legislature of the 13th of Elizabeth in imposing them. It intended then to exclude from offices in the church, 1. all abettors of Popery; 2. Anabaptists, at that time a powerful party on the Continent; 3. The Puritans, who were hostile to an Episcopal constitution.—“Whoever,” says he, “finds himself comprehended within these descriptions, ought not to subscribe.” He adds, that others may subscribe them, if not as articles of faith, as articles of peace.

On this doctrine of the Archdeacon’s, Mr. Gisborne suggests the following very just observations.

“That subscription may be justified without an actual belief of each of the articles, as I understand Mr. Paley to intimate, is a gratuitous assertion. On this point the articles speak for themselves. Why is an article continued in its place, if it is not meant to be believed? If one may

of the language of the Confession of Faith on this point, we cannot for a moment impeach the compilers of it with any deficiency in precision. They surely intended to give no countenance to the idea, that the particular mode of church-government was left as a matter of human discretion. Every subscriber not only asserts, that he is persuaded that presbyterian government is founded on, and agreeable to the word of God; but also, that to the utmost of his power, in his station, he will maintain, support, and defend the same. These expressions were surely never intended to imply that no particular mode of church-government is revealed in scripture, but that the discretion of individuals, and the circumstances of the times, were left to determine whether one mode was to be adopted or another. If this language be compatible with the supposition, that those who employed it held such sentiments, where is precision to be found, or what forms of expression can be resorted to, by which the opinions of one age can be transmitted to another?

“ be signed without being believed, why may not all? By
 “ what criterion are we to distinguish those which may be
 “ subscribed by a person who thinks them false, from
 “ those which may not? Is not the present mode of sub-
 “ scription virtually the same as if each article were sepa-
 “ rately offered to the subscribers; and in that case, could
 “ any man be justified in subscribing one which he disbe-
 “ lieved? No circumstance could have a more direct tend-
 “ ency to ensnare the consciences of the clergy, no cir-
 “ cumstance could afford the enemies of the established
 “ church a more advantageous occasion of charging her
 “ ministers with insincerity, than the admission of the opi-
 “ nion that the articles may be safely subscribed, without
 “ a conviction of their truth, taken severally, as well as
 “ collectively. That opinion I have seen maintained in
 “ publications of inferior note; but it was with surprise
 “ and concern, that I beheld it avowed by a writer of such
 “ authority as Mr. Paley.—GISBORNE’S PRINCIPLES OF
 MORAL PHILOSOPHY INVESTIGATED, 2nd edit. p. 193.

Respecting the inferiority of this subject in point of importance, when compared with many others that have occupied the attention of professing Christians, we do not for a moment entertain a doubt. No one can take a candid survey of the Christian world, without seeing many, eminent for personal religion, living under very different external arrangements. Let it, however, be recollected, that the relative importance of the subject does not at all affect the inconsistency of subscribing sentiments we do not believe. No one, for example, will compare, in this point of view, the doctrine of the atonement of Christ with that of the particular form of church-government we adopt; but the inconsistency is equally great, and the criminality too, so far as it consists in insincerity, if a Socinian subscribe a Calvinistic creed, and one who does not believe in presbytery subscribe a Presbyterian one.

I am, &c.

LETTER V.

CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

THE observations contained in the preceding letters relate entirely to the *constitution* of the church of Scotland; my next objections to continuing in its communion refer to the *administration* of it. Let no one suppose there is any inconsistency between these two classes of objections. Though the constitution of a church may appear unscriptural (and we should consider this alone a sufficient reason for leaving it); yet the manner in which the administration is conducted, may in some cases mitigate the evils which the system itself may have a tendency to produce. On the other hand, the administration may be such as to give the fullest energy to every defective principle in that constitution, and counteract the operation of any that are of an opposite kind. The existence then, of an administration of this description, may fairly be considered as an additional reason for withdrawing from any establishment in which it is to be found. My objections on this head are derived from THE VERY GREAT RELAXATION OF DISCIPLINE IN EVERY DEPARTMENT OF THE CHURCH, AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF ACTING ON CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES IN HER COMMUNION.

This, in the first place, appears among those who are public teachers ; and we cannot reasonably expect any thing else, when we consider the manner in which they are invested with the sacred office. Nothing can be more obvious from the whole spirit of Christianity, than that the relation between a pastor and his flock must be a voluntary one. The idea of such a relation, where the pastor is not the object of the people's choice, is an absurdity. Such a system may be carried on where a profession of religion is merely used as a political engine, or where the people are buried in gross ignorance or stupid indifference ; but it cannot for a moment stand the test of even a small degree of knowledge, or of serious inquiry. Is it not, however, a notorious fact, that it is the law of patronage that determines who are to preside over by far the greatest number of the parishes in Scotland. Thus it often happens, that perhaps a dissipated, or even an infidel patron, is to appoint the person who is to be placed as a pastor over several hundreds of professing Christians. This needs no commentary : to mention it is enough.

Here, perhaps, some will indignantly reply :—The law of patronage we cordially detest ; but it is not a part of the constitution of the church of Scotland. On the other hand, does not that constitution expressly require the call of the people as a necessary step, previous to any one being ordained to the pastoral charge. Let it be recollected, we are at present speaking of the administration of the church. It is by no means requisite to our present argument, to inquire particularly when patronage was introduced, or how far it may now at least be considered as connected with the constitution of the established church. The following

account is given of the present state of the law respecting it by Dr. Hill, in the work already oftener than once quoted. After taking notice of the act of the British parliament, by which patrons were restored to their ancient rights, he adds :

“ The church of Scotland complained of this act as
 “ an invasion of its privileges ; made various ineffec-
 “ tual efforts to obtain a repeal of the act, and during
 “ a great part of the last century, gave annual in-
 “ structions to the commission of the General As-
 “ sembly to make due application to the king and
 “ parliament for redress of the grievance of patronage,
 “ in case a favourable opportunity for so doing should
 “ occur. But, since the year 1784, this article has
 “ been left out of the instructions given to the com-
 “ mission. A great majority of the members of the
 “ church, both ministers and laymen, are now con-
 “ vinced that patronage affords the most expedient
 “ method of settling vacant parishes ; and whatever
 “ difference of opinion may still prevail on the ques-
 “ tion of expediency, few pretend to doubt that pa-
 “ tronage is the law of the land, interpreted and con-
 “ firmed by various decisions of the civil courts, and
 “ by the uniform voice of the judgments pronounced
 “ by the church during a long course of years.”

HILL'S THEOL. INST. p. 195.

This system then, certainly is a part of the constitution now in the most essential sense. It is a principle that is daily acted upon, that possesses the most extensive influence, and that is universally recognised by its members. Let it not be said this is going too far. We readily allow many uniformly oppose its pernicious influence, at least in church courts ; but do they not as uniformly acknowledge men as ministers

in these courts, who are entirely indebted to the law of patronage for the places they at present occupy? This dispute may, however, be brought to a short issue. If it be contended that it is not a part of the constitution of the established church; then it is a gross, and many will allow, a most dangerous innovation. Should not this be a sufficient reason for relinquishing a communion in which there is such a departure from the principles they are called to subscribe? In order to become acquainted with the present constitution of the established church, we must look not into the formula, but into the state of our church courts. This will, indeed, be considered by many as an unwarrantable position. So far, however, as it affects the comfort of the individual, it will be found a just one. Of what avail are good principles, if only held in theory, and not acted upon; and is it any solid consolation, when we are constrained to act upon bad ones, that we have not at least solemnly subscribed them, and they do not form a professed part of our creed.

It is readily acknowledged, that that part of the constitution of the church, which requires the call of the people as a necessary step, previous to the ordination of a minister, if faithfully followed out, would tend considerably to counteract the evil effects of patronage. To prevent mistakes, however, I must be permitted here to take notice of the absurdity of supposing the general body of the people capable of choosing a minister of Christ, or that merely as the inhabitants of a parish, they should have any thing to do with such an election. This is an inconsistency with the religion of the New Testament, that meets us at every turn in discussing any point connected with a national religion. Mr.

Wilberforce justly observes, that "Christianity, in the language of scripture, is not a geographical, but a moral term. It is not being the native of a Christian country. It is a condition, a state, a possession of a peculiar nature." When I speak then, of the call of the people as in any way productive of good effects, I beg not to be misunderstood. I do not suppose that even this would ever put things on a scriptural foundation. I only mean that the evils of patronage might thereby be corrected; and in this point of view, when compared with that system, the tendency of this measure would be in a certain degree beneficial. But it is well known that this part of the constitution has now dwindled away into a mere form. It was for many years a subject of contest in church courts; whether a person could be ordained a minister of a parish without it. The period of struggle, however, has long since expired. Dr. Hill thus represents the regard that is now paid to this part of the constitution; and the statement must be universally acknowledged to be a most correct one.*

"It has been the immemorial practice of the church of Scotland, by appointing the moderation of a call, to give the people an opportunity of encouraging the labours of their future minister, by addressing to him this invitation; and in consequence of this practice, one of the legal steps in the settlement of

* Some apology may seem requisite for introducing the language of this writer so frequently; but I do it because he must not only be allowed to be a most unexceptionable witness in proof of what are the present usages of the established church, but also from the well known influence he possesses among the *moderate party*, as it is termed, he may be fairly viewed as expressing the sentiments of by far the greater part of the clergy.

“ a minister, is a sentence of the presbytery sustain-
 “ ing the call. But, whatever was the state of mat-
 “ ters at the time when this practice began, it is now
 “ understood that a call may be sustained, however
 “ small the number of subscribers. For, although the
 “ matter was long vehemently contested, and is still
 “ occasionally the subject of discussion, the church
 “ courts have shewn, by the train of their decisions
 “ during the greatest part of the last century, that
 “ they do not consider themselves as warranted by
 “ law to refuse admission to a presentee, upon ac-
 “ count of any deficiency in the subscription to his
 “ call.”—THEOL. INST. p. 205.

It is now considered then as a settled point, that be-
 the wishes or the opinions of the people what they
 may, any licentiate who can appear with a presen-
 tation in his pocket, has sufficient security of being or-
 dained minister of the parish for which it is issued.
 If in this case any one should venture to oppose such
 a measure as unconstitutional, because the call of the
 people is not obtained, he will soon find that such op-
 position is completely fruitless; and if he should ven-
 ture to carry it to a superior court, he will probably
 receive, as the due reward of his squeamishness, and
 to throw fresh light on the constitution of the church,
 a severe reprimand for disturbing the regularity of its
 procedure, and an express obligation personally to
 take a share in the ordination he opposes.

The truth of this I can assert from dear-bought ex-
 perience. In the presbytery with which I was con-
 nected, one of the parishes became vacant, and a person
 was presented to the living, who was found obnoxious
 to the general body of the people. As at the moder-
 ation of the call comparatively few subscribed it, a

majority of the presbytery thought they could not go on in the settlement. The case was of course appealed to the commission of the General Assembly, and the presbytery were commanded to proceed. It is here necessary to inform those who are unacquainted with the usages of presbyterian churches, that before any one can be ordained as pastor of a particular congregation, they observe a form called the serving of an edict. On this occasion the members of the congregation are asked, if they have any thing to object to the life or doctrine of the person who is proposed to be set apart as their minister. Well! at this stage of the business, some of the people came forward, and charged the presentee, among other things, with profane swearing. The presbytery, of course, thought it would be an insult on common sense, after going through the form of asking the people such a question, if they refused to pay any attention to their answer; in short, they considered themselves bound to inquire, if there was any evidence in support of such a charge. Here a fresh appeal was instantly made to the commission of the General Assembly. This for the time prevented any farther inquiry. When the case came to be discussed before that court, it was the general opinion that the presbytery acted improperly in not requiring the accusers to bring forward a regular libel, though some who had paid a good deal of attention to the forms of the church viewed the matter in a different light. One would here suppose, that even though the conduct of the presbytery had been irregular, that was no reason why the people should not be satisfied; why the spirit of that part of the constitution, which is intended to remove any prejudices from their minds, should be violated. But what was the decision of the

court? That, on a certain day, without any farther inquiry, the presentee be ordained, and that every member of presbytery be required to attend! I must confess, we all complied (one member excepted, who was at the time visited with family affliction). I have no hesitation in now acknowledging my conviction, that such of us as saw it our duty to oppose the ordination acted very improperly by such a compliance. Our opinion of the measure was not altered. Nothing was done, nor allowed to be done, which was calculated to remove our suspicion that there might be some foundation for the charge. If it be a maxim of scripture that every man must be persuaded in his own mind, and that whatever "is not of faith is sin," then no human authority whatever can justify a man in complying with a requisition which he is convinced is inconsistent with the will of God. Dr. Hill's account of the provision which the constitution of the church makes for the voice of the people being legally heard in the admission of their minister, is as follows.

"At any time during the course of his trials," says he, "they may give in to the presbytery a libel; charging him with immorality of conduct, or unsoundness of doctrine. When they present the libel, they bind themselves, under pain of ecclesiastical censure, to prove it; but the presbytery is not at liberty to proceed to the settlement, till the libel be discussed. After the trials of the presentee are finished, all who have any objections to his life or doctrine, are summoned by a paper read from the pulpit, which we call an edict, and may then, *without the formality of a libel*, state their objections as matter of charge. The charge will be disregarded by the presbytery, if it is frivolous; and as proof must

“ be instantly adduced, the edict does not afford any
“ occasion for vexatious delay ; *but it gives persons, the*
“ *most unacquainted with the forms of business,* an oppor-
“ tunity of stating their personal knowledge of any
“ circumstance in the character and conduct of the
“ presentee, which renders him unworthy of being a
“ minister of the gospel ; and by exhibiting the jea-
“ lousy with which the constitution of our church
“ watches over the qualifications of entrants, it fur-
“ nishes a lesson of circumpection to all who direct
“ their views to the church.”

This quotation tends very clearly to shew, that a constitution on paper and in practice may be two very different things. From the most perfect recollection, I can say that this was precisely the view which different members of presbytery entertained of the design of the edict. They conceived it was intended to give to persons, the most unacquainted with the forms of business, an opportunity of stating their objections to a presentee, without the formality of a libel ; and on this ground they proposed immediately to examine evidence on the charges that were brought forward. As I was appointed by the presbytery one of their representatives to defend their conduct before the commission of the General Assembly, I can vouch for this view of the subject being laid before that court. Some of the members, however, of the party with which the above mentioned author is known uniformly to act, without deigning to enter into any reasoning, to remove the difficulties the presbytery stated to any other line of conduct than that which they adopted, by a peremptory motion, which was carried by a majority, appointed the settlement in the manner I have already mentioned.

It is well known, that when such ordinations at first took place, before those who felt interested in the business had the good sense quietly to retire from the establishment altogether, and to choose pastors for themselves, it was not uncommon to oppose the settlement with open violence. Nothing could argue a more complete ignorance of the spirit of the gospel. We hope, however, the progress of knowledge respecting the nature of the kingdom of Christ, will effectually put a period to such measures; and that if professing Christians are not led by other means to more scriptural principles, they will peaceably withdraw, and avail themselves of the privilege bestowed by the excellent civil constitution under which they live, by adopting such regulations in divine worship, as from a serious inquiry into the word of God, seem most to accord with that infallible standard.

A violent settlement has, I believe, often been an object of terror to conscientious young men when entering into the ministry, who thought that if it came in their way they could in no shape countenance it. All these live in the hope that wherever such a settlement may happen, they at least shall not be under the necessity of personally engaging in it. But it deserves inquiry, if there be any material difference between ordaining men whose characters we cannot approve, and acknowledging them as Christian brethren after they are ordained; if there be, I must acknowledge I have not penetration enough to discern it. Sitting, however, with them in church courts; making them, perhaps, the organ of prayer, as presiding in these, and submitting to the laws which they enact; is surely the most decisive acknowledgment of them in this character.

It is not uncommon to hear it alleged as some

sort of palliative, at least of the law of patronage, that a patron, whatever his character may be, has it not in his power to injure the church, unless its interests have been previously sacrificed by the clergy themselves. Before any person be capable of receiving a presentation, he must have obtained a license to preach from a presbytery. Let presbyteries then, it is said, exercise sufficient caution; let them allow none to come forward in the capacity of a preacher but such as are duly qualified for the sacred office, and the pernicious effects of the law of patronage will be completely counteracted.

We have already remarked the absurdity of supposing, that a pastoral relation can exist where it is not as voluntary on the side of the people as on that of the minister. The question then, is not whether a patron or even a presbytery conceives a man fit for the sacred office, but is he the object of choice with the people over whom he is to preside? If this choice be not consulted, the pastoral relation cannot exist. But besides, this reasoning proceeds upon a supposition, which every thing, either in the history or the general tendencies of ecclesiastical procedure, completely forbids us to expect can be realised. One evil often begets another, and these when fairly introduced, have a reciprocal tendency to confirm and increase one another's influence. The law of patronage has introduced into their present livings by far the greater part of the clergy of Scotland, under a system, where in practice at least, the choice of the people is considered in no way essential. After a corruption of this nature is fairly established, does not the whole system present what amounts nearly to a moral certainty, that so far from its being checked, it must acquire an accumu-

lating influence. Such is the effect, it is easy to trace it to the cause, the union between the church and the world naturally produces this. Water seeks the level. —The magnet points to the north.—With almost as much uniformity may we expect men, who derive their present ecclesiastical situations entirely from the law of patronage, to support the principle on which their present comforts, (perhaps in one sense we may add, their future hopes,) are founded. Can it be for a moment supposed, that men who have themselves been introduced into a parish in opposition to the voice of the people, will be chiefly anxious to bring forward others, who are likely to be objects of popular choice. Facts, as well as the plainest principles of reasoning, prove, that they will not. When such characters appear before a presbytery, the majority of which are what are called *moderate brethren*; they are looked upon with an eye of jealousy or aversion; and though, perhaps, they cannot refuse them license, they plainly discover they wish no applications from men of such a character. Nor is this at all to be wondered at. A very slight acquaintance with human nature is sufficient to account for it. Abstracting from that opposition, which must ever exist between men of radically different sentiments, ministers who were never themselves the choice of their people, and by whom, perhaps, that choice is professedly an object of contempt, cannot feel gratified at any appearing in their neighbourhood, who in this respect differ from themselves. Unpleasant comparisons are immediately instituted. This produces inquiry and discussion; and from these, perhaps, arises what many consider as one of the most obnoxious of modern heresies, that, if a person is not satisfied with his parish minister,

he may go to a neighbouring one, from whose ministrations he may derive greater advantage.

From these observations, we see how vain the expectations are of some well-meaning people, who express their hopes, that degenerate as they acknowledge the church of Scotland now is, the time may yet come when she may experience a considerable reformation. I have sometimes heard this urged as an argument for remaining in her communion, when her corruptions could no longer be defended. Great as these are, it is said we entertain the hope of better days. We consider the church has little need to lose any of those remaining few in her communion, who are disposed to struggle for the maintenance of her ancient order and discipline. No! we conceive it their duty to remain at their posts; and not to give way to a spirit of despondency, but to exert themselves to the utmost in their particular stations, if, peradventure, a period of revival may yet arrive.—Fallacious hope! Every thing in the present system shews how unreasonable (I had almost said absurd) it is to entertain it. If it should even be alleged the time was when there appeared some chance of the evils of patronage being counteracted, and of that part of the constitution which consists in the call of the people being still maintained; though, from the nature of the system, even this we cannot admit; yet, does not every one know that now, at least, this is a lost cause; that precedent has succeeded precedent, where the wishes of the people have been treated with contempt? Does not every one know, that if a case were to be brought forward into the church courts, where a presentee had not the call of the people, with a view on this ground to prevent the settlement, it would be easy, with the

utmost certainty, to predict the issue? The point then is already decided. Every fresh accession to the number of those whose ecclesiastical existence depends on the law of patronage, strengthens the impossibility of an alteration, for all those who owe their preferment to such a measure, are sure, in their turn, to yield it their firmest support. The consequence is plain: the minority, who used to support the call of the people, is dwindling year after year. Indeed, it is not to be wondered at, that men who are really attached to this part of the constitution, should rather allow it to be quietly sacrificed, than bring forward the discussion afresh, while they know that nothing is to be gained by it but harsh insinuation and severe invective from their opponents, for disturbing the order of the church, and the tranquillity of the neighbourhood in which they dwell. Hence the boasted unanimity of some late General Assemblies, and that supposed improvement in the spirit of the times which it indicates. Fatal improvement! by which all hopes of a reform are buried in the grave, because founded on that part of the constitution, from which, if at all, they might have been expected to spring.

I have thus been somewhat particular in noticing the manner in which men are introduced into the sacred office in the established church, because it seems, in a considerable measure, to account for that very great mixture of characters to be found in her communion. All, indeed, are required to subscribe the same formula; and if subscription could produce unanimity, or if it necessarily implied a cordial belief of the doctrine contained in the standard to which it is appended, we should not then find that radical opposition of principle, which in church courts is at

present to be met with. It is readily allowed, that men united in spirit and in general principles, may entertain different opinions upon some points that may come before them. This, however, has no connexion with that decided, universal opposition to each other, which has created, and which marks the two opposite parties in the church. The questions that come before them are often questions of great importance. They involve great general principles. A difference of opinion upon them cannot take place, without indicating a radical opposition in the systems on which the opposite parties act. Let us take, for example, that difference of opinion to which we have already alluded, respecting the necessity of the call of the people to the existence of the pastoral relation, or to the great ends of that relation being attained. Can men differ on this point, and at the same time entertain the same views respecting the leading doctrines, and the general spirit of the gospel of Christ? No! a difference of sentiment here is a sure index of two directly opposite systems, which never can coalesce. The man, indeed, who considers religion chiefly in the light of a useful political institution; as a valuable means of keeping the multitude in habits of decency and sobriety; who imagines that if these be secured, all will be well for eternity; who treats as the vagaries of enthusiasm, the necessity of a radical change of heart and of principle, before a man can enjoy solid peace; who would be shocked at the insinuation, that one though even decent in his habits, if a stranger to vital godliness, must stand exposed to eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord:—Such a man may well be supposed to consider the call of the people as quite unne-

cessary. It is not essential to his system.* With him it is the business of the legislature to appoint men to maintain the worship of the supreme Being through the country, and he conceives it a matter of comparative-

* Here it must be remarked, we by no means concede the position, that if we were merely to view Christianity, in reference to its present political advantages, as tending to raise the standard of morals in a country, it would not be expedient to consult the wishes of the people. We are convinced, that even that inferior good would be much more effectually attained, were their choice attended to. This discussion, however, is not here necessary to our argument. The system may at least go on, and a certain degree of political good be attained, though their choice is disregarded.

This naturally leads us to notice an argument we have often heard used in support of ecclesiastical establishments, from the valuable effects on the general standard of morals that are found to result from them. This reasoning, however, often proceeds on the supposition that Christianity and the civil establishment of it are the same thing. No one, indeed, can question, that wherever Christianity exists, it will in a certain degree tend to improve the morals of a people. A comparison of the morals of the inhabitants of Britain with those of Turkey, will illustrate this. But that improvement is the result of those valuable principles contained in Christianity being made known, not of the circumstance of its being by law established. The only ground on which any can imagine the civil establishment of it is essential to the general improvement of morals, is the supposition that the knowledge of it will not otherwise be generally diffused. How far the justness of this supposition is refuted by the exertions of dissenters in both parts of the kingdom, as well as those of some opulent individuals among ourselves, the reader must be left to judge. These, perhaps, may tend to shew that the diffusion of Christianity through a country, is not at least necessarily dependent on the aid of the civil power. We acknowledge, were not religion by law established, we should have the number of professors considerably diminished. We cannot, however, suppose the general standard of morals would be affected by this. One of the principal means of producing decency of character, even among those who do not profess Christianity, is the conduct of Christians around them, testifying in their consciences that there is a reality in religion, though they do what they can to resist that testimony. On this principle, we

ly little moment, under however great a variety of opinion on other points this is conducted. All this hangs well enough together. But, suppose a man has quite different views of Christianity; that though he feels and acknowledges its most beneficial effects upon our general character and habits, and in this respect is a great blessing to society, yet that it chiefly relates to the world that is to come; that while it tends to humanize the minds, and to ameliorate the manners of men, this is only a secondary and inferior good, which it unavoidably attains in its way to a greater; that it

apprehend that it will be generally allowed, that even an avowed infidel will be more decent in a community where he can see the effects of genuine Christianity on the character, than if his society were confined to mere professors, or other infidels like himself. In this case, it is not the profession, but the existence of Christianity that produces the effect; and though the number of professors were less, if those who were such were more exemplary, perhaps there is no reason to think that the general state of morals would be injured by the change.

The conclusion we draw from these observations is, that Christianity is useful in a political and moral point of view, in proportion as it diffuses truth and just principles through a country. Even a corrupt system of it generally preached, will raise the standard of morals above heathenism, and it will do so in proportion to the truth contained in it. But, if instead of this, a purer one be introduced (whether by law established or not), the beneficial effects will be greater, because the proportion of diffused truth is increased. Hence we must give the moderate clergy the credit of consistency, in endeavouring to oppose what others conceive to be genuine Christianity. It does not appear so to them. As they must view their own principles to be right, they must consider what is opposed to them, or what steps beyond them, to be wrong. But that men who themselves hold other sentiments, should oppose the publication of the doctrines they themselves preach, as essential to a sinner's hope, in places where they know they are not preached already, seems a melancholy discovery of the fatal influence of party spirit, and can never be supported on the principles of consistency and truth.

“ ings.” Jer. xxiii. 16, &c. Were not these things written aforetime for our learning; or will any one question whether or not what is here addressed to the Jews conveys any instruction to us who live in New Testament times? Let no one say this is judging harshly of those who differ from us. It must be recollected, that truth is one; and where men hold opposite radical principles, consistency absolutely requires that such as maintain one class of these, consider those who support the other as essentially wrong.

Again, “ Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheeps clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits.” Matt. vii. 15. In like manner Paul thus addresses the Galatians: “ Though we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again; if any preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.” Gal. i. 8, 9. In conformity with this too, is the language of the apostle John. “ Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed. For he that biddeth him God speed, is partaker of his evil deeds.” 2 John, ver. 9.

On this last passage, a respectable commentator whose work I have already had occasion to quote, and who was himself a member of the Scotch establishment, has the following observations. “ To prevent the person to whom this epistle was writ-

“ ten from being deceived by impostors, the apostle
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“ whom they deceived ; consequently, as the apostle
“ observes, they became partakers of their evil deeds.”

—M'KNIGHT.

This view of the import of this passage we may remark, is quite in unison with the precept of the apostle Paul, 1 Cor. v. 11. “ Now I have written to you
“ not to keep company, if any man that is called a
“ brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater,
“ or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner ; with
“ such an one no not to eat.” The precepts delivered by the two apostles seem founded on the same principle, viz. the harm that may be done by shewing any countenance to one who either violates the precepts, or perverts the doctrines of the gospel of Christ. But if the apostle thus cautioned Christians in early times against even bestowing the rights of hospitality on false teachers, and employing the common expressions of friendly intercourse with them, lest this should be interpreted as expressing some degree of approbation

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This view of the import of this passage we may remark, is quite in unison with the precept of the apostle Paul, 1 Cor. v. 11. “ Now I have written to you
“ not to keep company, if any man that is called a
“ brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater,
“ or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner ; with
“ such an one no not to eat.” The precepts delivered by the two apostles seem founded on the same principle, viz. the harm that may be done by shewing any countenance to one who either violates the precepts, or perverts the doctrines of the gospel of Christ. But if the apostle thus cautioned Christians in early times against even bestowing the rights of hospitality on false teachers, and employing the common expressions of friendly intercourse with them, lest this should be interpreted as expressing some degree of approbation

of their pernicious errors; how much more must it be inconsistent with this precept, publicly to acknowledge them in the capacity of Christian ministers, by sitting with them in church courts; there, perhaps, employing them in presenting our addresses to God in prayer, and professedly joining with them in their deliberations respecting the interests of the kingdom of Christ.

I am, &c.

LETTER VI.

CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

IN my former letter, I stated what appears to me sufficient evidence of a radical difference of sentiment, and opposition of principle, among the ministers of the established church ; a difference of such a nature, that if the system of the one class be the religion of the Bible, that of the other is not. The conclusion I drew from this was, that from different passages of scripture, it appears quite inconsistent with duty to have any ministerial intercourse with men in public office, whose principles we conceive to be essentially wrong.

I shall here mention two ways in which I have heard good men endeavour to evade this inference. First, it is often said, We are not at all answerable for the defects that occur in the administration of the church with which we are connected. These, we would not for a moment attempt to defend. But it is the *constitution* we subscribe. It is this we are bound to maintain ; and we consider it our duty, in our own sphere, when an opportunity occurs, loudly to condemn every deviation from it. The consolation, however, that is drawn from this quarter, cannot, I think, bear the test of fair inquiry. If our disapproving of

particular measures in the administration could procure us liberty to withdraw from having any personal concern in it; if we could refuse to acknowledge men as Christian brethren, whose principles we condemn; and if we could relinquish their jurisdiction; this might afford some solid relief. But it is well known this is not the case. However much some individuals may disapprove of particular measures, they may be constrained to take an active share in carrying them into execution. They are completely under the jurisdiction of church courts, whose decisions are guided by men whose principles they think radically wrong. The excellence of the constitution in such a case seems to afford but little comfort. It by no means bears on the difficulty that was stated. The difficulty is this. You are called, *in fact*, to acknowledge as ministers those whom you consider false teachers, and whose principles you think essentially wrong; and what is the solution? We subscribe, what is *in theory* a good constitution; such a one, that if its principles were acted upon, we should not be in any such disagreeable situation. Is the difficulty removed?

But there is another solution of it, which if it could be fairly maintained, would, doubtless, be more satisfactory. It is alleged by some ministers, in extenuation of their sitting in church courts with men of opposite sentiments, that in doing so they do not acknowledge them as ministers of Christ at all. They uniformly meet them on the ground of opposition; and every subject that is discussed, gives them an opportunity of shewing them that they most decidedly disapprove of their principles. This was seriously urged to me before I left the establishment, by an intelligent and useful Christian minister, as a satisfactory

solution of the above difficulty. To me, however, it never could appear in this light. There is surely in the conduct of such as hold this sentiment, something that is very apt to deceive. Were I addressing such ministers, I would say; Surely, my beloved brethren, from your own principles you should guard with the utmost care against whatever might tend to mislead, where nothing less than the everlasting interests of men are at stake. Are not these men with whom you sit in church courts, in one sense still your brethren? Though you think them essentially wrong, have they not still a claim on your compassion? You may indeed feel a secret conviction, that unless many of them at least experience a change of character, they are on the road that leads to ruin; but certainly, the nature of your connexion with them is calculated to prevent them from entertaining such an idea. It is true you oppose them; and you may consider that this habitual, stated opposition, indicates radically different principles. But you know well, they do not view it in this light.* They do not consider the difference

* We have a striking proof that the difference that prevails in church courts, is not considered by some of the moderate clergy, as implying any essential difference of principle, from the following passage in a sermon preached on the death of the late Dr. Erskine, by his surviving colleague.

“ The man of whom I have spoken, belonged to an
 “ old school, long and deservedly respected in the world,
 “ and to a class of men in particular, who, as ministers of
 “ religion, well maintained the dignity of the sacred order
 “ in this metropolis of their native land; who, differing,
 “ like others, about the outworks of the house of God,
 “ had yet but one mind in things that more nearly concerned both its honour and ultimate defence, and whose
 “ example had naturally an influence on the world, proportioned to the respect that was paid to their character.
 “ The last of them has, in the person of Dr. Erskine, been

between the two parties to be such, that if the ~~one~~ be right, the other must be essentially wrong. You know well that they allow that you, though weak, may be very well-meaning sort of people; that you have indeed, either from education, early habits, or bodily constitution, got an unhappy mixture of enthusiasm in your principles, which is productive of false zeal, and often afflicts you with a degree of squeamishness on some points, which they conceive to be very unnecessary. But making allowance for these weaknesses, which in their apprehension better principles, or perhaps a more vigorous understanding would correct, they do not conceive that there is any very material difference between you and themselves. You who know the original, will judge if the picture be not a tolerably correct one. If you really consider your moderate brethren then, as deceiving themselves in a matter of eternal moment; does not the nature of your intercourse with them

“ committed to the silent grave. But the names of such
 “ men as Cumming and Wishart, and Walker,—Dick and
 “ Robertson, and Blair,—are embalmed with the name of
 “ Erskine, in the hearts of all who have learned in any
 “ measure how to value what is most respectable in our
 “ Zion. God grant, that while their memory is yet fresh
 “ in the mind, the men who now fill their places in the
 “ world may catch a portion of their spirit! God grant,
 “ that while they, like Elijah of old, may yet seem to be
 “ but dropping their mantle on the earth, their spirit also,
 “ like that of the prophet, may remain to bless the chil-
 “ dren of men.”

Did the difference of sentiment that prevailed between the two classes of characters above mentioned, relate to points not essential; then what a pity is it, it appeared so much, and was carried so far; that such a handle was given to the world, to represent the ministers of the gospel of peace as perpetually wrangling and disputing with one another. Did it, on the other hand, relate to such as were essential, is it not equally to be regretted it was not carried much farther.

tend to support the deception? We naturally judge of men's principles not from what may pass in the heat of debate, and far less from consequences only deducible from this, but from the general tenor of their conduct; and surely, sitting with men year after year in church courts, and professedly deliberating with them about the affairs of the church of Christ, has the most awful tendency to mislead them, if at bottom you view them as enemies of the cross of Christ. But farther, observe the tendency of this conduct on the world. Is it calculated to make them imagine that there is any radical difference of principle between the two parties in the established church? Though some who particularly attend to the subject may see this, certainly the general body of the community do not. They often speak of one party as a little stricter than the other; but when this is mentioned, they conceive the whole amount of the difference is told. I readily acknowledge that the world will not see the difference, though we take the most decided steps to shew it. But, as we value the souls of men, it is surely our duty to avoid every thing by which that difference is concealed. Brethren, the time is short. The consequences of every part of our conduct will soon appear. The utmost possible fidelity in all our intercourse with our fellow-men is of the last importance. Examine this point seriously. It is a subject that richly deserves investigation. Our principles here must possess an extensive influence over our conduct; and we all allow that errors, either in opinion or practice, which result from neglecting inquiry, are unquestionably criminal. I am persuaded it is owing to want of examination, that many valuable Christian ministers do not discover the inconsistency between their

principles, and the situations they at present occupy.

Before concluding this part of the subject, I would just farther remark, that, allowing the above interpretation might be put upon the opposition which one party gives to another in church courts, still a fresh difficulty occurs. Ministers in the established church are unquestionably placed under the jurisdiction of the presbyteries, and the other ecclesiastical judicatories with which they are connected; neither can it at all be a matter of doubt by what party the decisions of these courts are regulated. Admitting then, the principle of this apology we are considering, the question naturally occurs, Is it lawful for Christian ministers to subject their consciences in matters relating to the church of Christ, to men whom they do not consider as influenced by the spirit of the gospel? To me this question seems to admit of no discussion. The decision appears self-evident. I cannot conceive any principles founded on scripture, by which the affirmative can be maintained. The inference, however, is sufficiently obvious. Unless the lawfulness of such a conduct can be supported, the most favourable construction that can be put upon the opposition which the one party in the church shews to the other, were it even more uniform and decided than it is, can by no means, in my apprehension, justify evangelical ministers continuing in the establishment, while they have such sentiments respecting the characters of those with whom they are connected.

I have thus stated what appeared to me, after mature examination, a solid scriptural reason for leaving the established church, from the almost total relaxation of discipline among the clergy, when viewed along with that unavoidable connexion which every

minister in that communion must have with all the rest. Though this is often a subject of lamentation among private Christians in the establishment; yet they are apt to think it one, which is only interesting to the clergy themselves, who from their public situation, are expressly called to act along with men of an-opposite character. Flagrant abuses they will allow exist; but they conceive it quite out of their power to do any thing to correct them. They would by no means defend these; but if Providence (they argue) has blessed them with a serious gospel minister, they have reason to be thankful, and have nothing more to say. Here, however, it becomes every one to inquire what is the nature of the *system in general* we are contributing to support: We do not ask, are valuable Christian ministers found connected with it (of this we presume no man will entertain a doubt); but is it as a *whole*, agreeable to the revealed will of God? It is by the answer we can fairly return to this question, that the general effect of our conduct is to be estimated.

Christians in the private walks of life are apt to lay too little stress on their individual influence or example. But every one, however limited his sphere, tends to swell the tide of public opinion, either in one direction or another; and, however trifling we may consider our influence, it is surely of much importance that, such as it is, it be directed into the right channel. It is a talent granted to us; and, however small, we are unquestionably answerable for the improvement we make of it. Do any of my Christian friends then, to whom these letters are addressed, perceive any force in the foregoing reasonings? Do you consider ministers, who, in many points, you are justly bound to esteem,

not acting on Christian principles, in having connexion with men of sentiments directly opposite to their own? Then it surely becomes you to inquire how far you are authorized to countenance even your most valued friends in principles and practices you hold to be wrong. Let no one here insinuate, we wish to alienate your affections from your ministers. No, brethren; but you yourselves will allow, that great as that ought to be for their works sake, and the truth that dwelleth in them, your attachment to the cause of the Lord Jesus ought to be much greater. Now, what is it that it requires? It certainly requires that we countenance no system which is inconsistent with the revealed will of God. Can this then be said of that when taken as a whole, which you and they at present support? This seems the only question by which the path of duty is to be determined.

The effect that would, perhaps, in some instances be produced, by private Christians acting on the principles I have described, would be that of leading the ministers to whom they are attached to leave their present situations. One considerable inducement to remain in them, is derived from the comfortable intercourse they can enjoy with the chosen few in their congregations whom they really consider Christians. Thus, I believe, it often happens, that serious ministers and their Christian hearers, contribute to countenance one another in situations which, perhaps, both may have some secret suspicions are not very scriptural. Were such members of their congregations to withdraw, they could find little comfort in those that remain. Besides, one obstacle to their leaving their present connexion, might in this way be considerably removed, I refer to the difficulty of obtaining the means of support in a similar

sphere of usefulness. We do not inquire at present, how far this difficulty is a legitimate one; but that man would argue but little acquaintance with human nature, if he doubted that even among good men it will have its influence. But, supposing this to take place, that the decided conduct of private Christians on the above mentioned principles, was not only to induce their ministers to take such a step, but along with it to enable them to continue in a sphere of public exertion; would it not be one, in all probability, extremely conducive to their comfort and usefulness? If I may judge from experience, I should conceive it would contribute much to both. Instead of being forced into apparent union with those with whom they have no common principles, and peremptorily excluded from it with those with whom they have, (which is literally their present situation,) they would be no longer fettered in their exertions; they could co-operate with those with whom in principle, and I trust in many cases, I may add, in heart, they are united; they could engage in the exercise of Christian discipline with those who were desirous of being regulated by the laws of Christ; and they could, wherever an opportunity occurred, enjoy the liberty of preaching to their fellow-sinners the gospel of the kingdom. I acknowledge, when I think of the destitute situation, in point of religious instruction, of many parts of this country, and contrast with this the eminent talents for public usefulness which many of my professional friends in the establishment possess, I cannot but feel a deep regret, that they should be confined to the weekly labours of their own parish, while thousands within their reach are perishing for lack of knowledge, and of the appointed means of obtaining it. It is im-

possible to calculate the good that might be done, if every evangelical minister were circumscribed in his exertions, by nothing else but the verge of that circle in the surrounding neighbourhood which his activity could reach. Time is on the wing: souls are precious; and each of us, brethren, should be solicitous to improve to the utmost possible degree, every opportunity of usefulness.

To this I have heard good men often reply: we feel none of those supposed fetters on our exertions you mention. We have as much to do in our own parish as we can accomplish. This may be so far true. If the most laborious minister had only a hundred people to watch over, he might spend all his time usefully among them. But, would it not be more conducive to usefulness, if instead of continually addressing the same people, he had it at least occasionally in his power to preach to those who did not hear the gospel at all? Every evangelical minister will easily discover many parishes in his neighbourhood, which on his own principles, he must acknowledge to be in this deplorable situation. It is true, he may be often invited to assist his neighbours: but what neighbours are they? Such, perhaps, as preach the same doctrines with himself; and, of course, it is of little consequence, whether he preach in their parishes or not. He may also, indeed, be occasionally asked to assist his *moderate* brethren. But this unfortunately cuts two ways. There cannot, perhaps, be a more decided proof of a most defective arrangement, than that a Christian minister cannot observe one part of the commands of his divine master, without violating another. This is plainly the case here. While he preaches the gospel to a destitute congregation, he

is by the very act of doing so, virtually acknowledging as a public teacher, one whom he does not consider a minister of Christ. But suppose one of these moderate brethren, with a little more consistency than is frequently discovered by either party, were never to think of asking any one to assist him but those of his own sentiments, there might in that case exist a parish where, according to the principles maintained by evangelical ministers, the gospel of Christ was never preached; and the establishment would not only make no provision for this dreadful defect being remedied, but so far as its powers extended actually furnish a security against it. Is there nothing wrong in a system from which so serious an evil flows?

But I now proceed to another defect in the administration of the church, which appears fully to authorize, nay, to require a separation from it; *I mean the almost total want of discipline which is to be found in individual congregations, and the impossibility of introducing it.* As this is a subject in which private Christians are apt to feel themselves more immediately interested, let me request your attention to the following observations.

There are three different steps appointed to be taken by the members of a Christian church in case of offences; none of which can be observed in the establishment. The first is recorded in Matt. xviii. 15—17. a passage I had formerly occasion to quote. “More-
“ over, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go
“ and tell him his fault between thee and him alone.
“ If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother:
“ but if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one
“ or two more, that in the mouth of two or three wit-
“ nesses every word may be established. And if he

“shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church ;
“but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be
“unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” It
is true, in the communion of the established church,
if one professing Christian be offended with another,
he may go and tell him his fault. If this do not suc-
ceed, he may take with him one or two more. But
should this also fail, how is the next part of the rule
to be observed? He may indeed complain to the ses-
sion; and they may call the offender before them:
but is this the rule of scripture; or has the person
offended an opportunity of obtaining the opinion of
his Christian brethren in the church at large, upon
the subject of offence, thus to have it removed, and
to bring the offender to a sense of sin? Every one
knows he has not. In the passage, however, above
quoted, if other modes of removing an offence do not
succeed, we are explicitly called to tell it to the
church; and we are surely not at liberty to tamper
with the express rule of scripture and say, the busi-
ness which our Lord committed to the general body,
we will allow to be managed by a few individuals,
while that body is never consulted.

Another step in the discipline of a Christian church
is mentioned, 1 Tim. v. 20. “Them that sin, rebuke
“before all, that others also may fear.” There is
indeed one sin, that of fornication, often rebuked in
the establishment. But, from the way in which the
business is usually conducted, even this cannot be pro-
perly considered as a part of the discipline of the
church of Christ. In most places a rebuke is adminis-
tered to every one who is guilty of the offence, and
willing to submit to the censure; though he has never
been admitted to the communion of the church at all,

and though no symptoms of penitence appear in his character. But is not this almost the only sin that is thus treated, as if there were no other way in which professing Christians were found deviating from the precepts of God's revealed word?

Here, however, it may perhaps be asked, where lies the blame? Is it not, in a great measure, to be found with ministers themselves? Might not they with their session, call other offenders before them, and treat them in the same way? Yes! they might, but what is the consequence?—Here, again, the evil of the system appears.—Admitting that a minister and his session were perfectly unanimous, that one chargeable with some other violation of the law of Christ should be publicly rebuked; nay, supposing the congregation with which the offender is connected were of the same opinion, he may, if he chooses, appeal to the presbytery, and if he do not receive the wished-for redress, there he may farther apply for it in course to the synod or General Assembly. Here it may be alleged, that though this undoubtedly takes the power of administering discipline out of the hands of those among whom the offence was originally committed; yet we cannot suppose that such an appeal will be of any avail to the offender, unless there be some deficiency in the evidence by which the charge brought against him is attempted to be substantiated. We readily admit it is in many cases difficult to obtain satisfactory evidence in support of a charge, which we have at the same time much reason to suspect well founded. But we believe it will also be allowed, that that difficulty is greatly increased, by the different views, which they before whom the charge is brought, entertain of the degree of *criminality* which the *matter*

of the charge contains. Hence, the difficulty of proving a particular violation of the divine law often depends very much on the characters of those to whom it is to be proved. If they have such incorrect views as to perceive comparatively little evil in the particular iniquity of which an offender is accused, it will be very difficult indeed to bring any satisfactory proof of its having been committed. It may be replied here, that such a case, no doubt, may exist, as that of a libel being proven, though the person is not guilty; because the charges in the libel may be such as implies little or no criminality. Such, however, are not the cases that are likely to occur in church courts. The line between what is sinful and what is not, is laid down with too much precision in the word of God to admit of this. But, a man may be often secretly influenced in judging of a charge, by his view of the sin alleged in it, even where the avowed ground of his decision must be a deficiency in the evidence by which it is supported. Every professing Christian, for example, particularly those who are called to act in a judicial capacity in church courts, must publicly condemn intoxication, though in his private sentiments (perhaps occasionally exhibited by a practical illustration) he might be clearly of opinion, that occasionally indulging in a glass too much, really contained in it but little or nothing that seriously deserved censure. A little acquaintance then, with human nature, will, I believe, clearly convince any one, that our views of the evidence adduced on any particular subject, are apt to be considerably biassed by the manner in which we are affected towards the point to be proved. This is apt to be the case, even where it is only some speculative opinion we are disposed to sup-

port. But if the point to be proved is of another nature ; if the principles or the character of some of the party with which we co-operate are involved in it ; if it be of such a kind, that if allowed to be established it may one day in its course severely militate against ourselves ; it is easy to see how exceedingly this bias must be increased.

These seem the only principles which can account for what we behold taking place in church courts every day ; I mean that whatever is the subject, (unless the minority give up the point, from seeing that opposition is unavailing,) the house is almost uniformly divided into two parties. Are there not many cases which clearly appear proper subjects of church-discipline, which, if brought before a modern General Assembly, we could easily predict what would be the issue ?—But if we could suppose an assembly composed of such men as the late respected Dr. Erskine, and those who used to co-operate with him, would it not be as easy to predict an issue quite the reverse ? To what is this to be ascribed ? To different principles, on which these two classes of men would judge of *evidence* when presented to them ; or to an occasional difference of opinion which men of the same leading sentiments might entertain ? No ! but to a radical difference of principle biassing their judgments, and leading them to form opinions directly opposite on almost any case that came before them. These remarks may tend to shew, that the power an offender has of appeal to the presbytery and superior courts for redress, must render completely nugatory every attempt which the most conscientious minister and session can adopt, faithfully to administer the laws of Christ's kingdom, as they re-

gard professors chargeable with public offence. On this point we may just add, that if even the most correct decision from a presbytery, a synod, or a General Assembly, could in every case be depended upon, still this is a deviation from the plain rule of the word of God. According to it, every case of discipline is to be determined by the church, or particular society with which the offender is connected; and its decision is to be final. Besides, it is obvious that in this system of appeal, one great design of discipline, (perhaps we may safely say the principal one,) which is to remove offence from those to whom it was originally given, is completely frustrated. This is not done, unless they are personally satisfied. Now, the very idea of an appeal implies the want of this. Satisfaction may be given to a presbytery, a synod, or a General Assembly, while the offence, so far as it respects the party who originally received it, is by no means removed.

A third step in the exercise of Christian discipline, clearly pointed out in the word of God, is the exclusion from a church of Christ of open transgressors, while they give no evidence of repentance. A case of this nature, and the law of Christ respecting it, is recorded, 1 Cor. chap. v. Because different opinions have been entertained respecting the meaning of some of the expressions in this chapter, a handle sometimes has been made of this to throw a general doubt over the whole. This, for example, has been the case respecting the expression that occurs, ver. 5, where the apostle desires the church to deliver the offender to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. As there are two kingdoms in the world, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil, and as those who embrace Christianity are said to be delivered from the power

of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son; so exclusion from a church of Christ is aptly enough expressed, by delivering one unto Satan. From the phrase, however, *for the destruction of the flesh* being added, some apprehend that something more than simple excommunication is meant; and that the apostle here refers to a bodily disease, with which he was empowered miraculously to punish notorious offenders. To this there seems a plain allusion, chap. xi. 30. Others understand by the term *flesh*, the mortification of the offender's pride, lust, and other fleshly passions. But, without here entering into the respective merits of these interpretations, which would only be digressing from our argument, we must remind you of a principle mentioned in a former letter, that our ignorance or doubt respecting some points should not affect our assurance of others. No one, I think, can read the passage, and fairly question this position, that the church at large is here expressly required to exclude from their communion any professor who was a fornicator, covetous, an idolater, a railer, a drunkard, or an extortioner, unless he gave satisfactory evidence of his repentance. The first expression in support of this assertion that occurs, is in ver. 2, where the apostle complains that they had not mourned that the gross offender, who had appeared in the church, had not been taken away from among them. He then reminds them, ver. 9, that he had written before, "not to keep company with fornicators; yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you, not to keep company, if any man that is called a bro-

“ther be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or
“a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner, with
“such an one no not to eat.” The lowest view
that can be taken of the expression, *no not to eat*, unquestionably implies exclusion from the communion-table, though I can by no means think it confined to this. It seems plainly to suggest our obligations to avoid that sort of friendly and familiar intercourse, which is usually indicated by persons inviting one another to their table. The reason is plain. Such intercourse seems incompatible with that decided condemnation we should uniformly express of that conduct by which a man has been justly excluded from a church of Christ. But let it be recollected, that communion at the Lord’s table is the highest kind of communion we can enjoy on earth. If then, that which is inferior be prohibited, which consists simply in friendly intercourse, this superior kind must, of course, be condemned. The expression, in the conclusion of ver. 13, is, if possible, still more explicit. “Put
“away from yourselves that wicked person.”

Here then the law is laid down. The church at Corinth was bound to exclude from its society such persons as were chargeable with the sins above mentioned, while no evidence of repentance appeared. If we admit the authority of apostolic precept or example, the same law is equally binding on Christians in the present day. There is something then essentially wrong in any church where it cannot be observed.

Our position was, that while in the established church there is an almost total relaxation of Christian discipline, in the present state of things it is impossible to restore it. It is easy to see, that the same reasoning we employed to shew the impossibility of administer-

ing, in every case that requires it, public rebuke, will equally shew the impossibility of exercising this higher measure, exclusion. It is not merely a minister and session, or even his whole congregation, if they were consulted, that must be satisfied with regard to the propriety of adopting it. The presbytery must be made to see that it is right; and if an offender should even think they were a little partial, if he can obtain a majority in the General Assembly, he can smile at the scruples of his offended brethren, and as if the decision of a church court could admit him into heaven, he can insist on what he ignorantly terms his *Christian privileges*. But I shall reserve some farther remarks on this subject for another letter.

I am, &c.

LETTER VII.

CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

IN the conclusion of my last letter I endeavoured to shew, that the rules mentioned in scripture for the regulation of discipline in Christian churches cannot be observed in the church of Scotland; that neither private offenders can be treated according to our Lord's rule, nor those chargeable with open and gross sin publicly rebuked or excluded, according to the circumstances of the case, as the apostolic precepts expressly require.

That this is a fact, is what many are not disposed to call in question. But while they allow it, I have been often seriously asked what harm does this to the individual? Surely, it is said, in partaking of the Lord's supper, every one has only to do with himself; and I find that I can enjoy this ordinance, though I have much reason to suspect persons of a very improper character are seated around me. To this it is often triumphantly added, What sort of a church do you take yours to be? Do you imagine it is a perfectly pure one? If you do, you will soon find yourself mistaken. Wait a little; though you may begin well enough, like most others, you will soon become like your neighbours.—This remark upon the folly of ex-

pecting a perfectly pure church on earth, is often brought forward in such a way, as if it were supposed to preclude all farther inquiry, and finally to settle the dispute. Permit me, however, to request your patient attention to a few observations on this reasoning, reminding you in the outset, that the question is not what is, or what may in future be the state of this or the other church (for the corruptions of one will make no apology for those of another); but what is the rule prescribed by the word of God? It is surely of importance for Christians to inquire respecting the path of duty on this point, as well as every other.

First, then, I know no class of Christians that denies the propriety of discipline altogether. Though we cannot expect a perfectly pure church on earth, if by the phrase is meant either a church of perfect characters, or one in which we are perfectly certain all are believers; yet every one will allow we should not deliberately admit open impurity. How strange would this reasoning appear, when used in reference to the character of individuals, which is often so confidently applied to communities? I know perfect purity is what I cannot expect to attain on earth; it is therefore vain to attempt an approach to it; I may deliberately live in known iniquity. Such a mode of reasoning we should universally condemn; and yet it seems just as improper to apply it to the one case as to the other. Though perfect purity then, cannot be attained; no one argues that no degree of it ought to be attempted; and wherever the shadow of discipline exists, our obligations to attempt some measure of it is virtually acknowledged.

A distinction has been often here stated, which seems to me a solid and satisfactory one. It is that

which subsists between a hypocrite and a person chargeable with open iniquity. By a hypocrite I here mean not one who, though he makes a profession of religion, discovers his real character by a conduct inconsistent with that profession; but one who, though false at bottom, assumes the guise of religion so completely, as effectually to impose on those around him. Such characters may be in every church; and no blame attaches to a church, though such should exist in her communion. The reason is plain. We are never required to examine the hearts of men. It is not our province; it is completely beyond our power. When such characters exist, they do no harm to the members of a church, because there is nothing in their conduct that throws a stumbling in the way of their Christian brethren. They, in like manner, do no harm to the world by their profession of Christianity, because there is nothing that tends to give occasion to the enemies of the Lord Jesus to blaspheme. To their own Master, who is the Searcher of the heart, and the alone Judge of the secret motives of men, they must stand or fall. The case, however, is certainly very different with those who are chargeable with open iniquity. For that kind of purity which consists in preventing such persons from prostituting the ordinances of the gospel, by remaining members of a church while they are continuing in the known practice of sin, I most decidedly contend; and as this is the purity required in scripture, there seems nothing in it which is not attainable. Nay, no one can doubt that it is practicable, who believes that it is enjoined. It is the want of this degree of it, or rather the impossibility of attaining it, of which I complain in the established church, and which I am persuaded produces effects the most pernicious.

Before leaving this part of the argument, I must observe how little force there is in the objection that is derived, either from the present imperfections of the independent churches lately instituted in this country, or from their supposed degeneracy in after times. That imperfections appear we allow; nor is this to be wondered at, when it is considered that such societies are in a great measure a new thing in this part of the kingdom, and that we have all the disadvantages arising from many early prejudices, and much inexperience, to encounter.—But, do any of these churches deliberately tolerate what is a plain deviation from the laws of Christ? If so, let them be given up to deserved condemnation.—But, supposing even this severe charge to be substantiated, still the argument remains unaffected by it. Let it be recollected, it is *systems*, not the characters either of individuals or of particular societies, the merits of which we are here canvassing. These are only implicated so far as they are found countenancing a system of which there is satisfactory evidence that it is not agreeable to the word of God. The question then here is, do the principles on which these churches are constituted, preclude the ^{re}form of abuses, or present any obstacle to the full observance of the laws of Christ? If not, their constitution may be scriptural, though their conduct should be deeply censurable. In the church of Scotland, however, this is not the case. If the preceding reasonings be just, they tend to shew, that in its administration not only these laws are not observed, but from the nature of the system they cannot be. We would not be understood by this to insinuate, that Christians are called to continue in any church, however scriptural its constitution, if the members of

it, in spite of remonstrance, persisted in the neglect of any of the laws of the Lord Jesus ; but it is because such a palpable evil not only exists in the establishment, but admits of no remedy, that we here infer a connexion with it to be clearly inconsistent with the word of God.

Some endeavour to obviate all the objections that are drawn from the defective administration of the church, by remarking, that charity thinketh no evil. It is the spirit of the gospel to judge as favourably of others as possible ; and it is sometimes hinted, that if Christians were more disposed to look at home, they would see enough there to occupy their attention, without thinking so much of the character of their neighbours. It is not thus, however, that we are to shake off our obligations to attend to an express precept of God's holy word. Our obligations to look at home none will dispute ; but surely, one duty should not jostle out another ? Charity, it is true, thinketh no evil ; but it also rejoiceth in the truth. There are here two extremes into which men are apt to fall.—Judging rashly, and condemning without evidence, is one ; but neglecting to try men by the rule of scripture, and admitting them to communion where there is no want of evidence of their living in known sin, is another. It is surely possible to fall into the latter of these, as well as the former ; and this is not charity, but the most complete violation of it.

It is worthy of notice, that when our Lord, Matt. vii. 2, is speaking of the difference between a man's profession and his practice, he lays it down as a rule to his disciples,—By their fruits ye shall know them. The mode of expression seems to imply, that it is not merely a matter of *permission* that we are allowed to judge of others in this way, but a matter of

duty, we are called to do it. It was, indeed, a subject worthy of an express precept by our blessed Lord. We are all disposed to form some opinion or other respecting the characters of those around us. This is too often influenced by prejudice, by false information, by party spirit, or some such improper principle. Here Jesus, however, prescribes an unerring rule. It is the only fair and sure standard by which, when we can have recourse to it, our opinions ought to be regulated.

No one will, I think, deny that had the church at Corinth disregarded the apostle's command respecting the characters which he required to be excluded from its society, as in a passage formerly quoted, it would have been highly blameable. If so, and if what was addressed to that church was intended to be a rule to Christians in every subsequent age; then, wherever any of such a character as the apostle there mentions are retained in the communion of any church, there must be a grievous fault *somewhere*. This is generally allowed; but the blame is usually thrown on those only who occupy public offices; and as others imagine it is entirely out of their province to interfere in these matters, they conclude that no part of it can be imputed to them. I shall here then state the grounds on which it appears to me that this cannot exculpate private Christians, in countenancing a communion they confess to be unscriptural.

Who were commanded by the apostles to see that the discipline of the early churches should be properly conducted? Not merely the public officers of the church, but the general body. This is apparent from the mode of address at the beginning of the different apostolic epistles. All those sent to particular churches

are plainly addressed to all the members in an associated capacity. To take one example out of many, the 1st epistle to the Corinthians is directed to "the church of God which is at Corinth; to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours," 1 Cor. i. 2. Now this is the class of people who are enjoined to put in execution the laws respecting discipline, which are contained in the subsequent part of the epistle. In like manner, when the apostle writes his second epistle, in which we learn they had complied with the injunction contained in the first, he speaks of the punishment to which the offender had been subjected, as inflicted of many, 2 Cor. ii. 6. In this expression there is a plain reference to the share which the general body of the church took in the administration of its discipline. The general body then of every Christian church has still the same trust committed to them. It is no apology here, to say we are not consulted. This is only putting the difficulty a little farther off, and saying that one evil introduces another. It is in other words acknowledging, that though you are entrusted by the great Master with the discipline of his house, you have thought proper to renounce the charge, and put it entirely into the hands of others. They have agreed to take upon themselves all the responsibility, and therefore, whatever mismanagement may take place, you imagine you shall be called to bear none of the blame. But we are not thus allowed at our option to decline a trust with which we have been so solemnly invested by the Lord Jesus; a trust, the faithful discharge of which is so intimately connected with the prosperity of his kingdom. If the discipline then of a

Christian church is thus committed to the general body of its members, surely where it is notoriously neglected, nothing can secure them from a deep share of the blame? I acknowledge difficult cases may sometimes occur, where, from local circumstances, Christians must either partake of ordinances, amidst many palpable and acknowledged defects in the administration of discipline, or be deprived of them altogether; but surely, where Christians find that remonstrance is vain; that the very constitution of the church with which they are connected effectually precludes a return to scriptural order; that as long as they continue in it, they must live in the known neglect of a part of the institutions of Christ; the call seems a pretty plain one, to relinquish such a society as soon as they can find one where scriptural discipline is maintained. As this, however, is a principle that has been very warmly controverted; and as many Christians, though they most readily acknowledge the grossest abuses in the church with which they are connected, by no means see it their duty to separate from it; it may be useful to examine the grounds on which the propriety of such a separation has been called in question.

The principal argument I have seen urged against such a step, is drawn from there being no express command given by the apostle to any of the church at Corinth to separate from the rest, in case the majority had not observed the injunctions he gave them, respecting their treatment of the gross offender that had appeared in their society. The same observation has been made respecting the epistles, addressed in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of the book of Revelations to the churches in Asia. In these, it has been said, there were

many grievous defections; and yet the pure part of these churches is never required to separate from the other. These, it will be observed, are only different cases, where the argument is the same. An answer to one, will, of course, include an answer to the rest. We shall select then the case of the church at Corinth; and inquire why we find no command, on the supposition of the majority proving refractory, that the other members should secede.

Here, I would in the first place remark, we are apt to form very erroneous views of the characters that composed the apostolic churches, if we suppose they were similar to the members of the churches established by law in the present day. Observe, for example, how those who composed the church at Corinth are denominated. "The church of God, the sanctified" in Christ Jesus, called to be saints," chap. i. 2. And again, chap. vi. 11, after the apostle had been enumerating some of the gross sins with which heathens in general are chargeable, he adds, "Such were some of you; but ye are washed; but ye are sanctified; but ye are justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the spirit of our God." These expressions tend to shew, that gross as some of the abuses were which prevailed in that church, from their newly emerging from a state of heathenism; still, as a body, they had the distinguishing marks of the disciples of the Lord Jesus; marks which constituted them quite different characters from their careless and ungodly neighbours around.* How far these expressions are

* In some of the very interesting accounts we have lately received from our baptist brethren in India, we find a striking resemblance between some of the Hindoo converts, and what appears to have been the character of some of the members of the church at Corinth. From their pre-

applicable to the general body of the members of national churches, you yourselves must determine. The same observation may be made with regard to the churches mentioned in the book of Revelations. Let any one carefully read the epistles addressed to them, and he will see that the language is only applicable to Christians; though many of them in a state of grievous defection, that many of the expressions cannot possibly apply to those who had never any pretensions to Christianity at all. At that period, it should be recollected, the very profession of Christianity was in general a tolerably good test of sincerity, on account of the dangers to which the person who made it was exposed. At the very time that John was directed to write these epistles, he was himself in a state of banishment in the isle of Patmos, for the word of God, and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Such, then, were the characters that composed the early churches. Amidst all their defects, they were distinguished from an ungodly world by some of the most decided marks of vital Christianity. Such were the persons addressed by Paul, when he wrote to the church at Corinth. The epistle was addressed to the whole body. As a

vious habits they sometimes discover extravagances both in opinion and practice, which in this country we would never dream of; while along with these they give good reason to hope, that they are really influenced by the belief of the truth. The same cause accounts for these apparent inconsistencies in both. Christianity, in both cases, had to encounter not merely carelessness, or even habits of iniquity contracted amidst a blaze of surrounding light, which, though disregarded, at least discovered their criminality; but such habits, contracted amidst the darkness of heathenism, which by long concealing their guilt, tended more deeply to rivet them, and even where grace interposed, rendered an effectual deliverance from them a more gradual attainment.

body, they were in some points much to blame ; but from the constitution of the church, whenever the apostolic authority was interposed, they could unite in correcting what was amiss in their conduct.

We must here remind you of a distinction formerly stated, which seems to contain a complete solution of any difficulty that may be supposed to exist in this case. The *constitution* of the church was scriptural, though its *conduct* was not. This is a distinction which all admit, whatever notions they entertain about church government. It is the foundation of the plea that it usually urged for continuing in societies confessedly very impure. We do not say it would be a valid one, if this unscriptural conduct were persisted in ; but this distinction tends clearly to shew the difference between the church at Corinth, and the established church, for example, in these lands. In the former, there was nothing in the principles on which the members of it were united, which prevented them from a full and immediate compliance with the commands of Christ ; and we accordingly find from the issue, this actually took place. In the latter, we have endeavoured to prove this compliance is impossible : at any rate, even where it is argued to be possible, it is acknowledged not to be observed.

We have then no direction from the apostle what individuals at Corinth should have done, on the supposition of the majority disregarding his injunction. The reason is plain. The case did not admit of it ; as, in a public capacity, they shewed a disposition to correct what was blame-worthy, all was well. The mere silence of scripture in this instance, surely cannot be considered as affording a rule for influencing our conduct in cases, the leading features of which are so com-

pletely different. The general body of the Corinthian church had, amidst all their defections, the distinguishing marks of the Christian character. The constitution of the church admitted an immediate correction of abuses ; and that correction accordingly took place. From this it is argued, that because from such a church Christians are not called to separate, they are to continue in fellowship with societies, the great body of whom they believe to have no pretensions to Christianity at all ; and the constitution of which effectually precludes the correction of abuses, the most flagrant which prevail in them. How does this reasoning hang together ; or how is it possible to consider the one of these principles a fair inference from the other ?

I have already hinted why it is unreasonable to expect any direction in this case with regard to the conduct of individuals, if the Corinthian church in general had disregarded the apostle's injunction. As that injunction was observed, there was no room for it. I think, however, we may fairly infer, from the general tenor of scripture, what would have been their duty on such a supposition. No one can question whether or not the rejection of the apostle's authority would have been criminal. He must, of course, have condemned all who had any share in it. But every individual must have taken a side. He must either have joined with the church in the disregard of the apostle's command, or he must have separated himself from them, and supported his authority. There seems very little difficulty in determining here what would have been the path of duty. Should there not be still as little in discovering it, when we are convinced that the society with which we are connected is really living in the habitual, deliberate neglect of those very

injunctions respecting Christian discipline, which were on this occasion addressed to the church at Corinth. Is not the conduct of those, who in the present day persist in countenancing impure communion, notwithstanding the apostle's condemnation of it, precisely similar to what, on the supposition that a division had taken place on this business in the Corinthian church, must have been the conduct of that party who were determined to keep the offender in their society? whose language, of course, would have been, We are resolved to go on in the way we are doing, let the apostle say what he will. I cannot see how it is possible to evade this inference. You are requested, Brethren, seriously to consider it. It must either be proved to be a false one, or it is easy to see it will lead to very decisive practical consequences.

It is curious to observe how much people are apt to be influenced in their reasonings, by the particular effects which it is foreseen will flow from them. The same kind of argument, which when applied to one subject seems perfectly conclusive, when applied to another appears to have no force at all. On what ground is it we maintain the propriety of separating from the church of Rome? Because she had completely departed from the ~~laws~~ of Christ's kingdom, and from the nature of her constitution, there was no possibility of her returning to them. In that case, the Christian reformers must either have continued in the communion of the church in which they were born and bred, while they knew that in doing so they were living in the neglect of a certain portion of Christ's revealed will, or they must have separated; they clearly had no other alternative. We know what they did; and no Protestant entertains a doubt, whether the step they took was

according to duty or not. Is it acknowledged that there is a discipline appointed in scripture to be maintained in the church of Christ, which in the present state of things is not, and cannot be maintained in the church of Scotland ; then the same question certainly occurs, Are we to continue in communion with her, and live in the neglect of that part of the law of Christ ; or are we called to separate from her, that we may have an opportunity of observing it ?

I know it will be here insinuated, that the comparison is by no means a fair one. Is it reasonable, it will be asked, to compare the church of Scotland, a church distinguished by so many godly ministers and eminent private Christians, with the church of Rome, when covered with the grossest abominations. The reformers separated from the church of Rome, because she was no church of Christ at all, and because she was totally incapable of reform. This we hope, however, cannot be pleaded here. We acknowledge, in the establishment there are many corruptions. These we sincerely regret ; but what church is free of them ? and great as they are, we hope for better days.—To this description of the church of Scotland, I readily subscribe. That there are many valuable ministers, as well as private Christians within her pale, none will dispute : and how far the hope of a reform is well founded, I have already considered in a former letter.—But can any thing that exists in the establishment of this country, be at all put in competition with the gross abuses that prevailed in the Romish church, at the time of the Reformation ?—I by no means say it can. But I have attempted to state some direct violations of the laws of Christ which prevail in the church of Scotland, and which, from its consti-

tution, cannot be corrected. Till then, we are informed what *precise degree* of known and deliberate neglect of the institutions of Christ's house may be allowed, and in a public body may be compatible with the character of a Christian church, I cannot discover how the reasoning by which we so justly defend the conduct of the early reformers, is not equally applicable to the subject we are at present considering.

With regard to the claim the church of Scotland has to the character of a church of Christ, I would only farther remark, we generally take our description of a public body, not from that of a few detached individuals of it, but from the general mass. If this mode of decision be a just one; if the character, in this instance, is to be determined by that of the majority ; how far the appellation of a church of Christ is here applicable, judge ye.

I am, &c.

LETTER VIII.

CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

THE observations contained in my last letter, were chiefly designed to shew the fallacy of the opinion, that in partaking of the Lord's supper, it is no business of ours to inquire into the conduct of those with whom we professedly hold communion; and that it can do no harm, though persons of the most immoral character should associate with us in the celebration of that holy ordinance. As this is one of the principal arguments by which many justify their continuing in the communion of a church, in which they readily admit there is the most notorious want of discipline, it may be proper to state some additional observations on it.

In the course of the preceding letter, I had occasion to mention the rule respecting discipline, which was expressly prescribed by the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth; and we attempted to shew, that countenancing the admission to Christian communion, of any living in open sin, was a direct violation of it. Several other passages may be quoted to the same effect. With this view, 2 Cor. vi. 14—17, has been often mentioned, "Be ye not unequally yoked to-

“ gether with unbelievers : for what fellowship hath
 “ righteousness with unrighteousness ? And what com-
 “ munion hath light with darkness ? And what con-
 “ cord hath Christ with Belial ? or what part hath he
 “ that believeth with an infidel ? And what agreement
 “ hath the temple of God with idols ? for ye are the
 “ temple of the living God ; as God hath said, I will
 “ dwell in them, and walk in them ; and I will be
 “ their God, and they shall be my people. . Where-
 “ fore, come out from among them, and be ye separate,
 “ saith the Lord, touch not the unclean thing ; and
 “ I will receive you, and I will be a father unto you,
 “ and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the
 “ Lord Almighty.” This passage, we acknowledge,
 had originally a reference to Christians separating
 from idolaters. But are we to suppose from this it
 has no other application ; then it will follow it is a
 passage of scripture which has no use, except among
 Christians living in countries where idolatry is prac-
 tised ? It is here deserving of remark, that the very
 word that is employed, ver. 14, to denote *communion*;
 is employed, 1 Cor. x. 16, to express that fellowship
 which Christians have at the Lord’s table. “ The cup
 “ of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion
 “ of the blood of Christ ? the bread which we break,
 “ is it not the communion of the body of Christ ?”
 The import of the passage then seems most explicit,
 that Christians are expressly required not to join in
 professed Christian communion with persons who are
 chargeable with open iniquity.

2 Tim. iii. 1—5. has also been frequently quoted,
 as equally explicit on this point. The apostle here
 predicts, that in the last days perilous times should
 come : and what was to constitute them so perilous ?

Men of a new and peculiar character should arise. They should be “lovers of their own selves, covetous, “boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, “unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, despisers of “those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.” Well! all this was nothing new. Such men have existed in all ages. But the dangerous peculiarity follows. Along with such a character, they should associate “a form of godliness, while they denied the “power thereof.” They were to be not men of the world, who openly live without God, and who make no pretensions to religion. From such characters no peculiar danger was to be expected. But they were to be immoral professors. Here the danger lay. They were to endeavour to unite the service of God with that of mammon; to render a life of sin compatible with the profession of faith in the gospel. When such men appear, the duty of those who respect apostolic authority is plain.—“From such turn away.”

To these passages we may add, the precept which is recorded, Eph. v. 11. “Have no fellowship with “the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove “them.” This, it may be alleged, seems chiefly to refer to the general tenor of our conduct in our intercourse with an ungodly world, that we are not to imitate them. But are we to confine it to this; or can we be said to observe the precept, if we hold professed Christian communion with those who are living in open iniquity? It deserves observation, that the same word which is rendered *fellowship* in this case, is used, Rev. xviii. 4, where Christians are called to come out of mystical Babylon, “that they be not *partakers* of her

“ sins, and that they receive not of her plagues.” Now, admitting the common Protestant interpretation of this last passage, that Christians are here called not to be partakers with the church of Rome in her iniquities ; how are they to comply with the injunction ? Can they do so, if they continue in her communion at all, though they be not personally guilty of the abominations with which many in that church are chargeable ? Does it not rather require an open and avowed separation from her ; the most decided expression we can possibly give of our disapprobation of her principles and practices ? In like manner, we surely cannot be said to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, if we join in communion with those who are known to practise them.

But scripture, if properly understood, must uniformly speak one language. There must be some mistake respecting its meaning, if there appear any discrepancy in its different declarations. As many then, defend impure communion, on the supposition that there are different passages which seem to countenance it, I shall next take notice of such of these as I have heard pleaded as an apology for such a practice.

It has been urged then, as an argument in vindication of continuing in the communion of a church confessedly very impure, that we find the grossest impurity, even among that small number who accompanied our Lord during his personal ministry on earth. One of them had a devil. That one, too, it has been argued, was allowed by our Lord himself to be present at the first celebration of the ordinance of the supper. It is surely then unreasonable to be so scrupulous, though similar characters should be found

in our churches. It is well known that it has been pretty warmly disputed, whether Judas was at the first institution of the supper or not; but as my answer to this argument does not turn upon this point, it is unnecessary here to enter upon the discussion of it. Here I beg leave to recall to your attention a distinction stated in the last letter, between a hypocrite and one who is openly immoral. Now; amidst all the atrocity of Judas's character, he seems plainly to have been of the former description. This is very apparent, from no suspicion being attached to him more than any of the rest, when our Lord told the disciples that one of them should betray him. Each individual asked, Lord, is it I? So far then, as related to the rest of the disciples, they could have no difficulty in associating with him, as long as his character was concealed. But it is urged, his omniscient Lord and Master knew it from the beginning. True; but this, if it proves any thing, unfortunately proves too much, and therefore nothing can be inferred from it at all. Our Lord, though he knew his character, chose him as an apostle, and sent him out to preach the gospel. Will it from this be argued, that we are allowed to ordain men to the sacred office, though we know them to possess characters the most unprincipled? I suppose this is an inference which no one thinks of drawing. But if our Lord's example will not authorize this, in opposition to the express precepts of Paul in his epistle to Timothy; as little will it justify impure communion, which is equally inconsistent with the same apostle's language to the Corinthian church. The truth is, the omniscience of Christ is never to be viewed as a rule of duty to us. To the law and to the testimony we

must resort, and be habitually influenced by their decision.

Another passage that has been quoted in vindication of retaining in Christian communion persons evidently living in sin, is the parable of the marriage-feast, recorded, Matt. xxii. We are there informed, ver. 11, “when the King came in to see the guests, he “saw there a man who had not on a wedding-garment; “and he said unto him, friend, how camest thou in “hither, not having a wedding-garment? and he was “speechless.” Here, it has been alleged, we find no complaint brought by the king against either the servants who invited this improper guest, or those who were found at the feast along with him. The individual alone is charged with guilt, and he is of course called to bear his own punishment. One who examines this passage superficially, is apt to be misled by the figure that is used. By the wedding-garment some suppose is meant regeneration; others, the righteousness of Jesus Christ: for our present purpose it matters not which is denoted by it. The fallacy then lies here. It naturally occurs to us, that any person must see what sort of dress every one has, who comes to a public entertainment; that of course, both the servants and the rest of the guests must have been able to distinguish this person from all others. But though the figure denotes that which is *external* and *visible*, that which it is intended to represent is something *internal*, and of course *invisible*; something that cannot be discovered by man, but which is only known to the great Searcher of hearts. This man then was a hypocritical professor. He appeared to accept the invitation to the marriage-feast as cordially as his neighbours. As man then can only judge from ap-

pearances, wherever such characters exist in a church, there can be no blame. We shall only add, that if any should object to this method of removing the difficulty, and still imagine the language refers to a character that could be known, this passage, like the one formerly considered, would then prove too much. It must be remarked, that on this supposition it not only exculpates private Christians from joining in communion with such as are known to live in sin, but it justifies ministers in admitting such. The servants who invited the man not having the wedding-garment, were no more blamed than the rest. Few, however, will go this length. They readily allow there must be no inconsiderable blame somewhere, when Christian ordinances are grossly prostituted.

The last passage I shall mention, and which is most frequently quoted in defence of continuing in the communion of a church confessedly very impure, is the parable of the tares and the wheat, recorded, Matt. xiii. 24. It may seem strange there should be such different opinions entertained respecting the meaning of this parable, when our Lord has himself given us the interpretation of it, ver. 37. The following observation on it will, I hope, sufficiently shew, that in whatever light it be viewed, it is at least completely misapplied, wherever it is quoted to support the propriety of holding communion with those who *give decided evidence that they are strangers to the power of godliness.*

1. It will be universally allowed as a just principle in interpreting scripture, that figurative passages must be explained in consistency with those that are simple, and the meaning of which admits of no dispute.

2. Two views of the import of this parable have

been suggested, either of which when taken as a whole, is consistent at least with other passages of sacred writ. The first supposes the field to be the church, while in a present world. If this scheme of interpretation be adopted, the tares must mean hypocrites, not the openly wicked; the wheat real Christians, as distinguished from hypocrites; and the object of the parable must be to shew, that though we are not to separate from our communion those we may merely suspect of hypocrisy, yet we may rest assured, a final separation will take place between the hypocritical professor and the genuine disciple of the Lord Jesus.—The other view of the parable is this. The field denotes not the church, but the world. By this expression is here plainly meant not the men of the world, as distinguished from Christians, but the habitable globe on which we dwell. Setting out on this principle then, the tares must mean not merely hypocrites, but the openly wicked; and the design of the parable must be to shew, that Christians must on no pretence persecute those who are living in sin around them. That it is the appointment of Providence that they and their ungodly neighbours live together at present, but that at the great day of trial they shall be for ever separated.

3. Whichever of these modes of interpretation be adopted, the parable contains nothing inconsistent with the general tenor of sacred writ. But this can only be said where they are kept separate, and when each scheme of interpretation is taken as a *whole*, and is respectively connected with its own proper appendages. If you take some of these belonging to the one, and associate them with those of the other, the unity of the parable is destroyed; nay you introduce a view of it

quite inconsistent with other plain passages of the word of God, and which of course must be a false one. But it is only by such a mode of explaining it, that it can be at all construed as sanctioning our joining in communion with open transgressors. To do this we must make the world the church, and the tares not hypocrites, but men known to be living in sin. But as this is in express opposition to the directions of the apostle to the church at Corinth, if the consistency of scripture be maintained, it is an interpretation which must at once be relinquished.

4. Though I conceive the above observations sufficient to shew that it is a complete misapplication of the parable, when it is quoted in vindication of such impurity of communion as we have been considering in this and the preceding letter; it may be proper to add a few reasons, from which the latter of the above mentioned interpretations of it seems obviously to be the true one.

Here it must naturally occur, that this is the only interpretation of the parable which accords with that key to its meaning, with which the Lord Jesus himself has been pleased to furnish us. We also find, that when using that key, every part of the passage has an obvious, important, and appropriate meaning. Let us try it. The field is the world. In it was originally sown the good seed. The devil, however, the enemy of God and man, introduced sin into it, here denoted by sowing tares. Hence these appear among the wheat. In the field, how are the tares distinguished from the good seed? not in the first period of their growth, but after the fruit appears. The wicked cannot be distinguished from the righteous in infancy and childhood. It is not till the dispositions be gra-

dually developed, till the character be somewhat formed, till they thus bring forth their peculiar fruit, that they are known. This is the uniform language of scripture. By their works men's characters are to be ascertained. We may here remark by the way, that after the fruit appeared, the servants are represented as being easily able to distinguish between the good grain and the noxious weed. Now this very much militates with the other interpretation, which makes the tares to represent hypocrites, because a hypocrite is really a concealed character. The tares in the interpretation are denominated the children of the wicked one, an expression in this connexion particularly, which certainly denotes a life of open wickedness. The servants of the householder are represented as saying to him, "Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? From whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, an enemy hath done this?" I am well aware, that in interpreting the parables of our Lord, we are not to look for a particular allusion in every minute circumstance that is mentioned in them. It will, however, be allowed strongly to confirm the justness of any interpretation, when we find that even those parts of a parable that may be considered as more incidental, while from the place they hold, they plainly refer to some of the leading doctrines recorded in scripture, contain representations in perfect unison with these doctrines. Now this is the case here. An enemy hath done it. This is the only answer which scripture any where gives to this question, which has perplexed men in every age, viz. How has sin been introduced into the world? "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth

“ he any man,” James i. 13. The wickedness that is in the world is to be ascribed not to God, but to the malignant enemy of God and man. We may just here add, that while in this view of the parable, the figurative representation perfectly accords with the fact as mentioned in scripture ; in the other, I mean that which makes the field the church, and which is the only view of it that can be forced into the service of impure communion, we unavoidably get into the inconsistency of representing the servants of the husbandman doing while awake what an enemy is said to have done while men slept.

The next incident seems to contain the special instruction this parable is meant to convey. “ The servants said unto him, wilt thou that we gather them up ? But he said, nay, lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them : but gather the wheat into my barn.” The proposal of the servants here, very much accorded with that of the two disciples mentioned, Luke ix. 54. The inhabitants of a village of the Samaritans had refused our Lord permission to pass through that village on his way. Filled with indignation at this, James and John said unto him, “ Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them ?” Notwithstanding, however, the severe rebuke they received from our Lord on that occasion, has not the same spirit discovered itself among professing Christians in every subsequent age ? How extensive its ravages, and how baneful its effects have been under the Popish hierarchy, when its power

was more extensive than, through the divine goodness, it is now, every one acquainted with church history knows. We may add, do not the penal laws against offenders, which are found among the regulations of almost every national church in which any degree of corporal punishment, or the loss of civil privileges is threatened, too plainly indicate the same spirit. The impropriety then, of Christians as such, pretending to punish, far more to attempt to extirpate wicked men, because they were the enemies of God, was a subject worthy of being particularly noticed by our Lord; and such seems to be the design of this part of the parable. A reason is subjoined why the servants are not to attempt to root up the tares; lest they should also root up the wheat with them. The stalks could be distinguished the one from the other by the fruit. But their roots were so interwoven, that the one could not be removed, without the other receiving material injury. What a lively representation is this of the connexion between Christians and ungodly persons in the social and domestic relations of life. Here, we behold a pious child supported by an ungodly parent. The preservation of the one is intimately connected with that of the other. There, we see an unprincipled master supremely devoted to the world; but in the prosecution of his business, he is made the instrument of supporting a godly servant with perhaps a numerous family. This part of the parable accords with what is pretty clearly taught in some other parts of scripture, that the wicked are preserved, and have many blessings conferred on them, chiefly for the sake of God's people, that they may administer to their introduction into life, and to their preservation and comfort in travelling through the wilderness. Such a connexion

Between the righteous and the wicked, is the appointment of Providence. We are not then to quarrel with it. But the harvest is approaching. The day of judgment is hastening on, and that is the period fixed for a final separation.

Viewing the parable in this light, I know no part of it which can be supposed to create any difficulty, except our Lord's expression, ver. 41, where he says "the angels shall gather out of *his kingdom* all things that offend, and them which do iniquity." Here let it be recollected, the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will. The Lord reigneth, let the earth be glad. He reigns in the kingdoms of nature and providence as well as grace; and this world is one department of his vast dominion. It is plain then, that the expression here, relates to the world in this point of view. The field, which is the world, is represented, ver. 24, to be the property of the person who sowed the good seed. The same is in like manner said of the kingdom. It was by stealth the enemy came and sowed the tares. Agreeably to this, the world is the property of its sovereign Creator. It is by injustice, by a mixture of deceit and usurpation, that the enemy of souls has any influence in it. But that influence shall be gradually destroyed. Before the time of the end, it shall be completely done away. The kingdoms of the world shall become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ. But at the end of the world, all who have ever lived in it shall be judged. It is then the final separation shall take place. Then shall all things that offend be gathered out of his kingdom, who is sovereign proprietor of all. The period of the invasion of his rights by his enemies shall be over. Then shall the devil and his angels, with.

their associates in rebellion among the children of men, be for ever cast into utter darkness. Then shall there be new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth *only* righteousness.

5. My last remark on this parable is, that like the other passages quoted to justify joining in communion with those who live in open sin, if it prove any thing at all, it proves too much. It cannot be understood in any degree to countenance this, unless we are prepared to say, that ministers are not only free from blame in admitting the openly ungodly to sacred ordinances, but that they would be really in a high degree culpable, if they pretended to exclude them; that they would be chargeable with a direct violation of the law of Christ, if they presumed to question the right of the most notorious profligate to sit down at the Lord's table. The reason of this inference is plain. It is an express command that the tares and the wheat are to grow together till the harvest. If the tares then are the openly wicked, and the field the church, it is criminal at present to separate them. Few, however, I presume, would think of occupying this ground. But surely, if such extravagant consequences fairly flow from a particular view of this parable, they sufficiently shew the fallacy of the interpretation from which they can be deduced.—An apology may seem necessary for dwelling so long on this passage. Those, however, who know how uniformly, and often in what a tone of triumph it is quoted, as tending to condemn the attempts that are made by some of the lately formed churches in this country to maintain purity of communion, will not, I hope, consider any part of the discussion as superfluous.

I have thus endeavoured to shew, that from differ-

ent declarations in scripture, churches are commanded to exclude from their society persons living in open sin. I have also attempted to prove, that the different passages, which are usually adduced in vindication of such persons being found in Christian churches, by no means support the conclusions that have been drawn from them. If the preceding reasonings on these topics be allowed to be just, the criminality of Christians joining in communion with such persons seems pretty clearly established. It may be useful, however, to add a few words on the very pernicious effects resulting from such a conduct.

The advantage of Christian discipline appears from its probable effects upon the individual who is the subject of it; upon the church with which he is connected; and on the world around. It is like all the other institutions of Christ, full of grace. He knew what was in man. He knew the tendency even his own people would have to go astray. In connecting them then in church-fellowship, he not only unites them by the ties of Christian love, but also by those of mutual interest. He makes them conducive to one another's safety and improvement. But what is implied, if we can say it matters not to us what sort of characters are in communion with us? It certainly indicates we have no correct notion of communion at all. This properly denotes a common interest in the blessings, the privileges, and hopes of the gospel. This is clearly taught, 1 Cor. x. 16, 17. "The cup of
" blessing which (or for which) we bless, is it not
" the communion of the blood of Christ? the bread
" which we break, is it not the communion of the
" body of Christ? Because (it is) one bread, we the
" many are one body, for we all partake of that one

“bread.” This will, I believe, be very generally admitted by those who have examined the original, to be the genuine import of the 17th verse, though somewhat different from our translation. If, however, we feel no concern about the characters of those with whom we associate in the ordinance of the supper, we may indeed remember the Lord’s death, but it is no communion. We plainly lose sight of one of the leading characters of the institution, and from such false notions, we are deprived of all that mutual safety that Christians derive from watching over one another in love. In such a world of temptation, this is surely no trifling loss. To such as know the extreme deceitfulness of their own hearts, the fidelity of Christian friendship, in warning them of their danger when they are apt to go astray, will appear a blessing of the highest value.

The importance to the safety of individuals, of correct views of Christian communion, and of brethren in a church feeling their obligations to watch over one another in love, may perhaps be aptly enough illustrated by the following anecdote which occurs in Captain Cook’s first voyage. In a high southern latitude, near the extremity of South America, Mr. Banks and Dr. Solander, with other ten, went ashore to examine the country; but as they had gone to a considerable distance, night came on before they could return to the ship. As the air was excessively cold, Dr. Solander, who well knew that extreme cold, especially when joined with fatigue, produces a torpor and sleepiness almost irresistible, conjured the company to keep moving, whatever pain it might cost them, and whatever relief they might be promised by an inclination to sleep. “Whoever sits down,” says he, “will

“ sleep ; and whoever sleeps will wake no more. “ Thus,” adds our author, “ at once admonished and “ alarmed, they set forward ; but the cold became “ suddenly so intense, as to produce the effects that “ had been most dreaded. Dr. Solander himself was “ the first who found the inclination, against which “ he had warned others, irresistible ; and insisted on “ being suffered to lie down.”—Mark here the value of association, and of those connected in a society taking a friendly interest in one another’s safety and welfare. Professing Christians, like these circumnavigators, are apt to fall asleep ; and if this be indulged, they may sleep the sleep of death. In a society, however, this tendency is not so likely to seize all at once. When one is affected by it, the friendly exertions of his brethren may contribute to rouse him, and when his vigour and activity are renewed, he may, perhaps, have occasion to repay to each in turn, the friendly offices which in time of need he received from him. In this delightful kind of intercourse which the Lord Jesus has established among his people, we have duty and interest combined. To all the other inducements to the exercise of brotherly love, we have that powerful one superadded, which a regard to our own spiritual safety and improvement is fitted to produce.

But it is not merely a *loss* that is sustained by the careless individuals of a church, where such relaxed notions of the nature of Christian communion obtain ; they receive a most serious *positive injury*. When you allow men to partake of the ordinances of Christianity who are living in sin, what is the result ? You foster them in a system of the most dreadful self-deception. They will admit they have their failings, and that they are not among the strictest class of Christ-

ians : but still, they hope they are among the number. Men, in looking forward to futurity, though the thought of it should be extremely transient, generally wish to have something to rest on. A mere profession of religion often forms a prop here, which however unavailing, at least prevents them from looking for any other support. In this way many, by being permitted to partake of sacred ordinances while living in sin, are lulled asleep in a state of the most fatal security ; while, if they were denied admission to these, and led to suppose they had no claim whatever to the Christian character, of all means this would be the most likely to excite in them a serious concern about the world to come. I can speak here from personal observation. I have no hesitation in concluding every one who joins in the participation of ordinances with persons living in sin, as contributing his share to that system of self-deception, which will be found at last to have ruined thousands.

It is unnecessary particularly to describe the pernicious effects of the want of discipline in a church, upon the general body of its members. These may be discovered from what has been already said respecting individual offenders. “ A little leaven,” says the apostle, “ leavens the whole lump ;” and it is on this consideration he urges the exclusion of persons living in sin from a church of Christ. But I shall now conclude this letter with noticing the effects which a departure here from the standard of scripture naturally produces upon the world at large.

Of late years, there have been many complaints of the alarming spread of infidelity in these lands. It is true, indeed, there has been a much more extensive avowal of it, though surely those who have made that avowal were never any thing else but infidels

at heart. But, without examining whether real infidelity be at present on the increase or decline in this country, we will be justified in asserting, that few things contribute more to its diffusion, than the sad prostitution of sacred ordinances that prevails amongst us. What was it that helped forward the infidelity of France? The mummary of Popish superstition; the play of priestcraft; the observance of a parcel of forms and ceremonies, while the native power and spirit of the religion of Jesus was completely obscured. What notions were superficial observers led from these to form of Christianity? They might view it in the light of a political institution; they might speculate upon its utility in this respect; but if they inquired no farther than what they saw, the idea of the divinity of its origin would never occur to their minds. Are no similar effects likely to be produced from the prostitution of sacred ordinances in these lands? In the early ages of Christianity, the consistent lives of professing Christians was one most powerful means by which its influence was diffused. The heathens beheld in these the glorious effects which this heavenly system produced. But if instead of this, a profession of it be exhibited to the world as compatible with a life of sin; if the drunkard, the swearer, the sabbath-breaker, be seen seated at the sacred table, must not the observer be either shocked at the profanity of it, if he has any respect for Christianity at all; or if the reverse be his character, must not such a sight dispose him to look upon religion as a mere farce, and thus contribute to confirm him in his infidelity?

I am, &c.

LETTER IX.

CHRISTIAN BRETHREN,

IN the preceding letter I have finished what it was chiefly my design to lay before you, as the grounds of my separation from the established church. I have attempted to shew in what respects its constitution seems to be unscriptural; and any one who views it in this light, can no longer consistently or conscientiously subscribe it. I have also endeavoured to point out such flagrant defects in the administration of its discipline (defects, too, which from the nature of the system admit of no remedy), that whoever examines the rules laid down in scripture upon this subject, must see the necessity of relinquishing that communion, before he can observe them. Some miscellaneous topics remain connected with this subject, but which the plan I had adopted precluded me from bringing forward in the course of the preceding letters. On these, I shall in this concluding one suggest a few observations.

Here, then, I would first observe, that the principles above stated, furnish a sufficient answer to a question that has been often asked, viz. Why do those who have of late professed to be so zealous to diffuse

the knowledge of the gospel through this country, not confine their exertions to those places where it is not preached. This, indeed, might have been useful; but it is not done. They go to places where, even according to their own account, it is preached already; as well as to those where it is not. This remark is chiefly applicable to those towns where houses have of late been opened for the preaching of the gospel, and churches on congregational principles formed. In answering this objection, it is not necessary to resort to the consideration of the places of worship in the establishment, where the doctrines of Christianity are faithfully taught, being in general quite inadequate to the reception of the great body of the inhabitants. Although it could be shewn there were places sufficient to contain all who would attend them where these doctrines are clearly preached, still we conceive it would be decidedly the duty of Christians to separate from the mass of immoral professors, with which, in their present state, they are unavoidably connected, and no longer to countenance a system which, when taken as a whole, they cannot consider to be founded on the word of God. The question here, is simply this. Is the preaching of the gospel the only thing Christians are called to look for in a church of Christ; or if this be obtained, may we deliberately dispense with other express institutions of his kingdom? If Christians find themselves placed in a situation where they cannot observe these, are they not plainly called to look out for another in which they can? We are not here to be alarmed at the change of separation. The only separation we should dread, is that which involves a departure from the laws of the Lord Jesus. It is this alone that will be found cri-

minal at last, whether it be practised by few or by many.

Again.—*Occupy till I come*, is an important precept left on record by the great Head of the church, the force of which men will feel in proportion to their impressions of their obligations to him who delivered it. Among other talents of usefulness, *property* is one which he has bestowed in various degrees upon his people, and which of course, they are called to improve to the utmost of their power. Here, we cannot but admire the connexion that subsists between different branches of Christian duty, and the tendency which the discovery of one has to throw new light upon another. In a former letter I had occasion to notice the extensive interest in Missionary exertions that was excited a few years ago, and how generally the principle is now acknowledged among Christians, that they are bound to contribute, according to their abilities, to send the gospel to their heathen brethren. In the progress of inquiry, this naturally led to another topic, the *degree* in which the friends of Christianity are called to employ their substance in promoting this object. Whatever had been done by some individuals in this way previous to that period, certainly the general body of Christians had been accustomed to do very little.* The truth is, a field for

* On this subject, the language of a late animated address to the Christian public is peculiarly forcible and just.
 “ We (Christians) have not been sufficiently separated
 “ from the world, either in our pursuits or our spirit. We
 “ have been drawn into the vortex of worldly ambition
 “ and covetous desires. We have been hoarding up riches
 “ for our children as it was in our power, though it be
 “ like building walls between them and heaven.— Yes :
 “ Christians, as if they had made a covenant with death,
 “ and with hell were at agreement, have distinguished
 “ themselves in the accumulation of wealth, the display of

such pecuniary exertion had not been pointed out; but as soon as it was, the obligation to supply the sinews of exertion in order to occupy it, naturally occurred. It is, however, much to be lamented, that though the doctrine of scripture respecting the duty of Christians to employ their property in the service of the gospel, has since that time frequently been pointed out, its influence is still much less extensive among professors than could be wished. Nor can this be matter of surprise; for, as it is not merely a speculative principle, but one that enters very deeply into our general habits and mode of living, we cannot expect any to act upon it who are not decidedly the followers of the Lord Jesus.

When the question is indeed asked, to what extent we are called to employ our substance in this manner; it is obvious, from the various degrees in which it is bestowed on men, as well as the almost endless variety in the peculiar circumstances of each, that no parti-

“ finery in their furniture, equipage, and houses, and have
 “ spent much of their time in paying and receiving useless
 “ visits, while but a small portion of their abundance or
 “ leisure has been applied in the service of Him who
 “ bought them with a price, and gave them all they enjoy.
 “ During a long period of uninterrupted prosperity and
 “ peace at home, and for the space of more than a century
 “ of religious liberty, many of them have been dwelling in
 “ their ceiled houses, while the Lord’s house has been lying
 “ waste. They have satisfied themselves saying, the time
 “ is not come, the time that the Lord’s house should
 “ be built. Their poorer brethren have in their measure
 “ been actuated by the same spirit. The mite of poverty
 “ and the offering of abundance have been almost equally
 “ withheld. Self-indulgence has been substituted for the
 “ devising of liberal things, or the performance of self-de-
 “ nying services.” The whole of this excellent address
 is seriously recommended to the attention of every reader.

—SEE ACCOUNT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY
 FOR PROPAGATING THE GOSPEL AT HOME. Edin. 1802.

cular rule can be prescribed. But though this is the case, there are some general points which seem pretty plain, and which, if acknowledged, shew how little attention professing Christians in general pay to this subject. These may be considered as somewhat approaching, at least, to a rule which will suit men in almost every situation. It may be useful to mention a few of them.

Though Christianity is no levelling system; though it does not require all to live exactly in the same style; yet every one must see, in whatever station he is placed in providence (unless confined to the mere necessities of life), that there is a certain range in the scale, a certain difference between what he may spend on his person or family, and that degree of penuriousness which would excite ridicule and contempt, and which would destroy the effects of his example on those around him. It is plain, the ability of a Christian to contribute by his property to promote the cause of the gospel, will be in a considerable measure affected by the place in this scale he is disposed to occupy. Now, what Christianity here requires, there seems little difficulty in determining.—Again, if from this general observation we descend to particulars, which is commonly done in conversation on this subject; though a man cannot always draw the line of distinction between the necessities and the comforts of life, and the comforts and the luxuries of it, there are many articles he can have no difficulty in placing in their proper classes here. How many, for example, cannot be considered as conducive either to health or comfort, but plainly belong to the catalogue of the gratifications of the pride of life? Where property is so much required for the diffusion of the gospel, every conscientious Christian who desires faithfully to follow

his self-denied Master, will be at little loss to discover in what direction the path of duty in this case will lead.—In like manner, a good deal of money is often expended in some trifling or frivolous gratification, in the indulgence of some particular whim, in defence of which nothing can be pleaded but a little temporary amusement. If this be such as does no harm to society, it generally goes by the name of innocent; and it is conceived, if a man comes lawfully by what he possesses, he is entitled to spend it in any way he thinks fit. Every discerning Christian, however, will judge differently here. He knows that this is a most criminal abuse of property, where so many cases occur, in which the sovereign Proprietor demands it for the advancement of his own glory, in promoting the eternal interests of the children of men.—Once more, it is a rule of scripture, that we should provide for those of our own household. But how often is this sadly perverted, when it is urged as an apology for hoarding up money, after a man knows that a competent provision is already made for his family, while the urgent calls of Providence require him to contribute to the immediate relief of those who are perishing in their iniquities, from ignorance of the path of life. In these remarks I have only noticed the obligations of Christians, to administer by their property to the *spread of the gospel*. I have omitted those under which they lie, to alleviate the *bodily distresses* of their fellow-creatures, not because they are either less binding, or appear in the general practice of professors to be sufficiently felt, but because they are at least more generally acknowledged, and our obligations of the former class are more immediately connected with the subject of our present discussion.

It may be thought by many I might have gone

farther, and stated some more specific rules on this subject. My design, however, rather is to direct the attention of my Christian brethren to the important duty of the conscientious application of property; as I am persuaded it is not so much owing to the difficulty of discovering it, as to a prevailing inattention to it that it is so little observed. The period is daily drawing nearer, when we shall all be called to give an account of our stewardship; and who would not wish, that his report should indicate the utmost possible fidelity, in the improvement of every talent with which he was entrusted. The question with us ought to be, not how much have we done; but can we do more: or is there is a possibility, that by more assiduously watching every opportunity of usefulness, and by increased vigour of exertion, we may more extensively advance our Master's glory, and thus turn the remaining portion of our short abode on earth to a better account than that which has already elapsed.

Some may here be disposed to remark, all this may be correct enough; but what is its connexion with the subject of these letters? The connexion is this. Some of those who were hostile to foreign missions, suggested as an apology for not countenancing them, that we had plenty of heathens at home. Why, said they, expend your property by sending persons to distant countries to diffuse the knowledge of Christianity, while there are thousands in our own land living in such ignorance and wickedness. Though this reasoning was originally used as an apology for not contributing to missionary exertions at all, it suggested a useful hint. Many Christians, aware of the truth of the assertion, saw the necessity of doing something in behalf of the numerous class of their ignorant countrymen. But how was this to be done? In connexion with the established.

church it could not. Melancholy as the situation of many parts of Scotland in a religious view is, such a connexion absolutely precludes a man from using the means God has appointed for remedying it. It is true, if he has property, he may disseminate useful books; and on some occasions he may get a catechist introduced; but what is the great means of divine appointment? Preaching the gospel. He is forced then to become a dissenter, before he can with any consistency either employ this method of diffusing the knowledge of divine truth, or take an active share in any measures which have such an object in view.

It must surely then, to every serious and reflecting mind, argue some radical defect in the established system, that while amidst the acknowledged want of evangelical instruction in many parts of this country, it not only makes no provision itself for remedying the evil, but, from its principles, absolutely precludes any within its pale from attempting it, though they were willing to do so at their own expence. I suppose it will be generally allowed, that if any private members of the establishment were to send a person to preach the gospel into any parish whatever, they would be considered as following divisive courses; and, however much their zeal might be secretly applauded by such evangelical ministers as are really in spirit dissenters from the majority of their brethren, they could not openly support such a cause.* It is true, there is one way, and, so far as I know, only one, in which the members of the established church can employ property in promoting the preaching of the gospel; I

* On two or three occasions before I left the establishment, I collected a few people, and addressed them from a passage of scripture in the parishes of other ministers; without having previously asked their consent; but not at the time

mean by purchasing presentations, and thus bringing forward evangelical ministers into situations of usefulness. This is, however, a very precarious method. For, omitting other objections to the measure, if there be an incumbent in the parish at the time the right of patronage is bought, it may be a long time before the possession of it can be of any service.—Again, though it should be purchased with the purest motives, after the death of the immediate purchaser the management of it must be left to others; and every one who has attended to this subject must know the extreme difficulty of leaving a trust of this nature, in such a manner that the views of the person in whom it was originally vested shall be faithfully followed out. But besides, if we could suppose all these difficulties removed, and that immediately on the purchase of the right of patronage, it was in the power of the purchaser to introduce an evangelical preacher into the living, though a certain degree of good might in this way be obtained, it would certainly be less than if a person of the same character and principles could be placed in the same part of the country, unconnected with the establishment. Such a connexion would not only confine his usefulness to a particular spot, however destitute the neighbouring district might be; but while

when there was public worship in the established church. This, I understood afterwards, gave offence; though it was never taken notice of to me while I remained in the establishment, but was (as I have learnt) made a ground of charge after I left it. It was supposed to come under the general charge of following divisive courses; a phrase of that convenient latitude, that every one may apply it as he thinks fit. I suppose, however, that whatever latitude any one may attach to the expression, none will question whether, in the present state of things, such a measure would be allowed; and yet it is very different from the one above supposed, that of countenancing stated preaching in any neighbouring parish.

it subjected him to the jurisdiction of the presbytery, it would totally unfit him from acting in the capacity of a pastor, agreeably to the dictates of the word of God.

In reflecting on this subject, I cannot but express my regret and surprise, that many opulent individuals in the established church, whose principles lead them to consider many parts of this country as destitute of the proper means of spiritual instruction, should not have done something in this way to remedy such an evil, as it is the only way in which they can do it. There must surely be something very defective in those principles, which can allow us to sit unconcerned, while we know that many are perishing for lack of knowledge, if we can possibly be instrumental in procuring for them the means by which it may be obtained. Such were not the principles by which Paul was animated. He laboured to the utmost, that none to whom his influence could in any shape extend, should remain ignorant of the way of salvation. I have heard indeed some pious ministers insinuate on this subject, that if the Lord had any good to do in a particular parish, it was easy for him either to bring the present minister, if a careless one, to an acquaintance with the gospel, or to remove him, and to place a faithful one in his room. Such reasoning, however, hardly deserves a serious reply. It is making the secret counsels of God the rule of duty to us; it is limiting the Holy one of Israel; it is not only supposing the establishment is the most likely way in which he will communicate his grace, but that it is the only way in which we can at all expect such a favour. This mode of reasoning can furnish no solid apology for neglecting that express command, which requires

that the gospel be preached to every creature. It may be considered, I think, as an indisputable maxim in Christian theology, that if there be any within our reach remaining destitute of the appointed means of becoming acquainted with the word of life, while it is at all in our power to communicate these, there is something which, upon Christian principles, must at once be condemned ; and any system which precludes us from employing such means, cannot be founded on the word of God.

There is another topic to which, in this concluding letter, I beg leave shortly to call your attention. It is the charge of *party spirit*, which almost all classes of professing Christians are so much disposed to allege against those who differ from them. As it is a feature of the character which all condemn, it forms a very convenient charge, when on any controverted subject one wishes to discountenance inquiry. I have little doubt that many, in reading the preceding letters, will insinuate they contain just the sentiments of a party, and that they are intended to condemn all, except the denomination to which the writer belongs. But is this reasonable or just ? Is it the way in which the progress of truth is to be promoted ; or is it not the most effectual way to retard it ? Is it not the method which many adopt to turn aside the attention of others from subjects which they do not wish them to examine, because they fear, perhaps, what may be the consequences of inquiry ? If in discussing any subject, a simple appeal is made to the word of God ; if it is brought forward as the only ground on which we approve of some practices and opinions, and condemn others ; we may be liable to the charge of misapprehending its meaning, or reason-

ing inconclusively from it; but that of party spirit seems, in such a case, totally irrelevant.—But, does not such a spirit actually exist? Is it not often manifested? and does it not frequently stain religious controversy? In what then, does it properly consist? Any man, I answer, seems liable to this charge, who maintains any part of his system not by scriptural evidence, but merely by the opinions and usages of those with whom he associates? Such a spirit is farther indicated by a disposition to deny any excellence in the characters of those not of our party, though there may be the most explicit evidence of their distinguished piety; or, if this is incontrovertible, to call in every circumstance by which we may detract from that excellence as much as possible. This is often accompanied with a corresponding disposition, to imagine every kind of worth is concentrated in those of our own denomination, and a determination to resist any evidence by which this opinion might be shaken. Party spirit likewise manifests itself by a readiness to hear with secret satisfaction, of the disputes that prevail among those who differ from us, or any thing that may tend to diminish their influence, instead of feeling for the defects of our Christian brethren, and for the injury which religion sustains in the eyes of the world from the uncircumspect conduct of any of its professors. It is also frequently discovered in a disposition to question, if any good can be done among any denomination but our own; and, instead of rejoicing in the gospel being any where successfully preached, in feeling a secret grudge that, if the spread of its influence was to take place, we and our friends should not have been the instruments chosen to promote it.

Such then, are the symptoms of an unchristian party.

spirit; but to comply with the apostolic admonition, in earnestly contending for what we apprehend to be the faith once delivered to the saints, if it is done in the spirit of the gospel, and by a uniform appeal to the word of God, while at the same time we rejoice in all the good that either appears in the characters, or is accomplished by the exertions of any of our Christian brethren, can with no propriety expose us to such a charge. It frequently, however, happens, that they are loudest in their exclamations against such a spirit, who are themselves most deeply tinctured by it. You will often meet with men who cannot hear with any tolerable patience a single argument against their preconceived opinions, who will neither read themselves, nor so far as their influence extends, allow others to read what is opposed to them; who are all the while complaining vehemently of the party spirit by which others are actuated. There surely cannot be a more decided indication of that very disposition of which such persons complain, than in refusing to examine any argument professedly founded on the word of God. If it be a false one, let its fallacy be pointed out, and then we are entitled boldly to discard it; till this be done, it possesses an undoubted claim to our most serious regard.

These observations lead me to take notice of an objection I have sometimes heard stated against one principle by which, perhaps, as much as any other, the members of the independent churches lately instituted in this country are distinguished. The principle consists in being prepared to change our opinions on any point, wherever we see that increasing light thrown upon scripture requires us to do so. This, we have been often told, is a very convenient principle. It is

impossible, from your opinions, one day to know what they are to be next. In this way, there is no security given that you are not to depart even from the fundamental doctrines of the gospel. It forms an excellent handle for the designing to impose upon the unwary : but people must be very foolish, indeed, who connect themselves with a denomination which, before they are aware, may lead them into the most dangerous errors. No ! no ! Let us have some fixed standard to which you pledge yourselves to adhere, and then we shall know where to find you.—How far the principle is a convenient one, is not with us a matter of concern. How far is it scriptural, is our only inquiry. Neither is it necessary to examine what evidence the history of the church affords us in proof, that subscribing a public formula secures against a departure even from the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith ;—a very cursory view of the state of the two established churches of this kingdom seems sufficiently to settle this point. But surely, those who themselves believe the fundamental doctrines of the gospel, are very incautious in suggesting that any danger can arise to these, from a principle, by which the supreme authority of scripture is so decidedly acknowledged. There is certainly no want of scriptural evidence in support of them ; and if this be the case, the higher the respect is that is shewn to such evidence, the more firmly is their influence established. But if we suppose that some one, from the seductive influence of error, was led in his private sentiments to abandon these doctrines, by conceiving them not founded on the word of God, would it be his duty in such a case publicly to maintain them ? Surely not. By doing so, sincerity, one of the first principles of religion, would

be directly violated. If it be thought that subscription to a formula may secure professional orthodoxy, whatever a man's private sentiments may be, it is no desirable attainment. In such a case, it can only foster hypocrisy; and, before the principles of the formula can be preached, the integrity of the preacher must be sacrificed.

But farther, do Protestants admit any other rule than that of scripture, as the rule of their faith? Do they claim infallibility in the attainments they have made; or do they suppose they have already reached such a maturity in knowledge, that there is no room for farther improvement. No! these are principles they avowedly disclaim. If they do so then, is it any thing more than consistency requires, to stand prepared to follow the increasing light of scripture, whithersoever it may lead, the very principle for which we are contending? All, too, will allow it is our duty daily to pray for more enlarged, or more correct views of every part of revealed truth. Surely, a principle then, which allows us, without restraint, to act on such an increase of knowledge, is at least much more consistent with such a duty, than when we pledge ourselves to maintain a certain class of principles to which, whatever alteration in the progress of inquiry our opinions may experience, we are under a powerful temptation professedly to adhere.

Before I conclude these letters, there is one class into whose hands they may occasionally fall, and whose attention I would particularly request to the subjects discussed in them; I mean such as propose to engage in the work of the ministry. I do not here allude to such as think of the sacred office merely as a method of obtaining a livelihood. Persons of this

description (and it is to be feared there are too many) will be apt to treat any expostulations on this subject with contempt. Any difficulties about the subscription of a formula, they consider as the silly scruples of weak minds; and they would conceive it very foolish to stickle about subscribing almost any articles, if a presentation to a comfortable living called on them to do so. There are, however, some of another description, who, in the prospect of engaging in the work of the ministry, are deeply impressed with the vast importance of the service, and the awful responsibility connected with the manner in which it is performed. Do not, my young friends, think that it is from a desire to promote the interests of a party, that I would seriously entreat you to examine well the grounds on which you proceed. Much of your future comfort depends on your being satisfied that the situation you may be called to occupy is agreeable to scripture, and that all the doctrines you subscribe are strictly founded on its authority. If you entertain doubts on this subject, though by the persuasion and example of good men whose opinions you respect, and whose characters you venerate, these may for a season be laid asleep; they will awake again; they will meet you at every turn; and if you are not more successful in getting quit of them than some of your predecessors, they will not only mar your comfort, but by depressing your spirits, they will damp your exertion, and mar your usefulness. Besides, this is the time you are most fit to examine these points. I do not say you can now do it with the greatest ability, but you can now do it with the greatest impartiality. A shrewd observer of human nature has justly remarked, that a man's character is apt to be formed much

more by the temptations, than by the duties of his profession. Even at present you will feel a bias, (for it is unpleasant to discover truths which will level at one stroke all our projected plans of comfort and usefulness,) but that bias will become much stronger after you are fairly embarked. The propensity then, is peculiarly strong, to justify the step we have taken; and our capacity of examining evidence on the subject, diminishes (unless some very striking incident occur) in proportion as our temptations to support one set of principles increase. It is far less difficult to avoid going forward than to recede.* Of late years, the

* On this subject, the following very just observations occur, in a work lately published by a respectable writer connected with the church of England.—“Against a temptation to use unwarrantable latitude in interpreting the articles, it is the duty of every one who studies them with a view to subscription, honestly and diligently to guard. A desire, previously formed, of entering into the church; the difficulties and inconveniencies of turning to another line of life; the suggestions of interest in all its shapes, referring to past expences and to future prospects; these, and other circumstances, will be very apt to bias the judgment, and influence the determination, of the inquirer. Let him never forget his danger; let him examine the meaning of the several articles with upright views and impartial investigation; let him not content himself with perusing what has been written in their defence; but qualify himself to form a satisfactory decision respecting their conformity to the scriptures, in the same manner in which he would enable himself to determine any other controverted point, by informing himself of the principal arguments alleged against them, and appreciating with equal deliberation and fairness what he finds urged on either side of the question. Let him remember, that if he subscribes while perplexed by distracting doubts, and without peace and satisfaction of mind, he not only incurs present guilt, and guilt too which will be likely to be continually aggravated, as long as he remains a minister of the established church with his scruples unremoved; but entails upon himself constant uneasiness and disquiet, and constant temptations to endeavour to blind his judgment, and stifle his

subjects treated in these letters, have been much more discussed than formerly; and if these discussions have contributed to throw any additional light upon them, we become proportionably culpable, if we either refuse to examine them, or resist what scriptural evidence is adduced to support. There is one principle, however, the truth of which we will all acknowledge, and the importance of which to our comfort we will all feel. Let every one be persuaded in his own mind. I am far from thinking that what has appeared decided evidence to me, will carry equal conviction to others; but let the subject be examined with impartiality and prayer; let us be prepared to submit to evidence, wherever it may appear, and to follow truth whithersoever it may lead us. Whatever be the issue of inquiry, it is only thus that solid and permanent satisfaction can be obtained.

I shall be happy, if any thing I have stated shall contribute to the diffusion of principles, which I am convinced are equally connected with the comfort of individual Christians, and the general prosperity of the church of Christ. The more I consider the subject, the more am I persuaded that the present union between Christians and the world is extremely unfavourable to both these objects; but many are beginning to inquire into this point, by whom it had long

“ conviction; temptations which will increase in proportion to the length of time during which he shall have been a minister of the national church, and to the preferment and profits which he derives from it. If the result of his inquiries and reflections should be such, that he feels himself incapable of making the necessary subscription with a safe and quiet conscience, let him desist from his intention of enrolling himself among the clergy of the establishment.—INQUIRY INTO THE DUTIES OF MAN, BY THOMAS GISBORNE, A. M. LONDON, P. 326.

been overlooked; and if this inquiry be conducted with candour and seriousness, and with a uniform appeal to the word of God, I have little doubt it will issue in a degree of separation from the world, which comparatively few have yet seen it their duty to adopt. In the preceding letters I have studiously avoided any modes of expression which might appear unreasonably severe against those from whom I am forced to differ. In this I hope I have succeeded. If I thought there was a single expression justly exceptionable on this ground, I would instantly expunge it. It is much to be regretted that a handle is often given to the enemies of the gospel, from the unchristian spirit with which publications of a controversial kind are conducted. It is surely possible for Christians to point out to others wherein they think them wrong, without losing sight of the equally important duty, of endeavouring to exhibit to the world the disingenuous spirit of the gospel of Christ.

I have only farther to present to my readers the following requests. *First.* Though some of the positions contained in these letters be thought questionable, let not these be considered as affecting the evidence of such as are satisfactorily proved. We do not look for infallibility in any human publication; nay, we should probably be disposed indignantly to throw aside any one, in which the author had the arrogance to claim it; and yet we often see one condemned, merely, it would appear, because it does not possess this character; or, in other words, because there are some positions in it which we conceive not quite tenable. These are often very unfairly selected; and, without farther inquiry, they are thought quite sufficient to discredit all the rest. This is not

surely the way to read with profit. To do this we must read with discrimination. "Prove all things, and hold fast that which is good." We should cheerfully receive what appears supported by evidence, though in company with that of which the proof may seem to us extremely defective.

Secondly. Every one who examines these letters will, I hope, consider his obligations to come to one decision or other on the subjects contained in them; and whatever decision he forms, to act consistently. I make this request, because I have heard persons in conversation, acquiesce in the validity of almost every argument I have brought forward; and yet, from the influence of habit, of indifference, of dread of singularity, or some such cause, deliberately go on in supporting a system they decidedly condemned. What a strange inconsistency is this! To the serious attention of such, I would recommend the following very just observations of a respected friend. "When men hate any part of divine truth, so as to disobey, contrary to the dictates of conscience; conscience frequently relapses into a state of insensibility, and disobedience comes to be awfully easy. There are persons who, for a time, were very much impressed with the importance of scriptural communion; but they would not act upon their convictions, and their convictions are gone. They appear to be quite reconciled to corruptions which alarmed them; and some of them are even zealous to lead others to the same state of indifference."* Though, when we consider the influence of education, of early habit, of early prejudices, and external situation, we cannot precisely ascertain the measure in which we are ac-

* See Missionary Magazine for Feb. 1804, p. 62. The whole of this article deserves the most attentive perusal.

countable, for the want of conviction in spite of evidence ; we surely are so in the most unlimited degree, for the manner in which we treat our convictions, after they have been fairly produced. The great Searcher of the heart alone sees them ; and, in the awful prospect of appearing before him, should not every man tremble at the thought of having failed to act up to the light he has received, and of having resisted convictions which he is conscious he has experienced ?

Let me farther request ; if any one shall think it worth while either to animadvert on these letters, or regularly to answer them, he will not merely fasten on particular expressions in what has been written, amidst manifold unavoidable interruptions, but fairly meet the general principles they contain, and on scriptural evidence shew that they are unfounded. As I trust they are written with a view to advance the cause of truth ; and as, in the preceding part of this letter, there is the most unqualified disavowal of any claim to infallibility ; I hope I shall feel genuine satisfaction in whatever way that cause is promoted.

I am yours, &c.

W. I.



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